

Such Great Heights by Keitorin Asthore

Category: Stranger Things, 2016

Genre: Angst, Hurt-Comfort

Language: English

Status: In-Progress

Published: 2016-10-08 08:30:45

Updated: 2016-11-28 18:48:38

Packaged: 2019-12-17 14:48:17

Rating: T

Chapters: 5

Words: 27,526

Publisher: www.fanfiction.net

Summary: They thought they lost Eleven for good. But secrets are coming to light, and they just might be able to save her after all. And once she's safe, she can have a chance for a normal life, as a normal kid...as long as they can keep her hidden.

1. Such Great Heights

Disclaimer: Stranger Things belongs the Duffer Brothers and Netflix, not me. This was all written on my phone so the typos and weird formatting is mine.

On November 6, 1983, Will Byers disappeared.

On December 30th, 1983, he disappeared again. But not for long this time. Only about 30 seconds.

They were all in the Wheeler's living room, piled on the couch and the floor watching movies and playing on Mike's new Atari system. His parents were out at a party, leaving Nancy in charge, and Holly was already asleep. It was an unremarkable night.

And then Will vanished.

One moment he was there, the next his Atari controller dropped to the floor and he was gone. There was a moment of silence.

"What the fuck?" Dustin shouted, scrambling back from the empty space on the couch where Will should have been. "What the fuck, what the fuck?"

Lucas leaped to his feet. "Will, this isn't funny!" he shouted.

"Guys, stop!" Mike bellowed. He pointed to the Christmas tree in the corner, its myriad of colorful lights turning on, off, on, off. Dustin clamped a hand over his mouth and hunkered down, stifling a stressed whimper.

It felt like an eternity, but less than a minute later Will flickered back into the room, in the exact same spot, wavering in and out of focus like an image on a TV set. "What the hell just happened?" Dustin demanded.

Will blinked slowly. "Hold...hold on," he said, his voice thin and faraway. "Give me a second."

Mike dropped to his knees beside him. "Will, were you in the Upside Down?" he asked. "Do you have powers now?"

"He's not in the X-men, Mike," Lucas scoffed.

Will swallowed hard, gulping something back down his throat. "He's right," he rasped.

"Which one?" Dustin asked. "Which one's right?"

Will shook his head. "Mike," he said. "I...I kind of..."

"Kind of what?" Mike pressed.

Will sighed heavily and leaned back against the couch, pushing his bangs off his forehead. "Ever since I got back it's been like...like there's a homing device, trying to call me back there," he confessed. "That place...got inside me."

"But you can get out, right?" Mike said. "Not like before?"

"Yeah, it's not like before," Will said. "It's different. It's like...I blink and I'm there, and I blink and I'm gone."

"Oh my god," Lucas breathed. "Does anybody know? Have you told your mom?" Will dropped his head and shrugged. "Dude! Tell your mom!"

"She'll freak out!" Will argued. "She panicked enough when I was actually missing, I don't want to put her through that again."

"Tell Jonathan!" Dustin suggested.

Will shook his head. "It's not that bad, you guys," he said. "It just happens sometimes. And I dream about it a lot."

"Really?" Lucas said skeptically. "Are you really there or just dreaming?"

"I don't know, honestly," Will said. "And she doesn't either so-"

He froze. "She?" Dustin repeated.

All the color drained from Mike's face. "Eleven?" he said.

"I...I didn't realize it was her at first," Will stammered.

Mike stood up. "Eleven's in the Upside Down?" he said, his voice rising.

Will nodded miserably.

"Shit," Lucas said.

"You've known she was there, and you didn't tell us?" Mike demanded, his face reddening. "You were there a week and you almost didn't make it! She's been there for two months! Two months, Will!"

"I'm sorry!" Will burst out. "I didn't...it's all really strange, and I-"

Mike lunged for him. Lucas and Dustin grabbed him just in time, wrenching his elbows back. "She's going to die out there and you didn't want to tell us?" Mike screamed.

Nancy stormed into the living room. "Knock it off!" she scolded. "I don't care what's going on, if you wake up Holly with your shouting Mom is going to-" She paused, taking in Mike struggling in his friends' grip and Will making himself as small as possible in the corner of the couch. "What's going on?"

"I thought you didn't want to know-" Dustin started to say. Nancy shot him a look.

"Will has weird powers, Eleven's alive in the Upside Down, and Mike is pissed that he didn't say anything about it," Lucas said.

Nancy's lashes flicked as she looked from one boy to the next, and then she turned on her heel and grabbed the phone from the wall. "What are you doing?" Mike asked, tearing away from Dustin and Lucas.

"Calling Jonathan," Nancy said, punching in the numbers from memory.

Will leaped off the couch and ran for her, trying to pull the phone away. "You can't tell him," he pleaded.

Nancy held the phone above his head. "He needs to know," she said firmly. "And if Eleven is in there, we need to get her out. We need backup."

"It'll kill them!" Will said. "If my mom and Jonathan find out, it'll ruin everything." His chest heaved. "Everything's been going so much better. My mom is happier, Jonathan isn't so stressed all the time." Nancy hesitated, her fingers hovering over the buttons on the phone. "Please. Nobody tell them. Not yet."

The room fell into thick silence. "I don't know if that's a good idea," Nancy said. "They'll want to help you. And besides, if Eleven is trapped there—"

"I'll tell them, I swear," Will promised desperately. "I will. Soon. Just...just not now."

"But what about Eleven?" Mike said. "What if something happens to her?"

Will swallowed hard. "I'll think of something," he said. "I just...need to figure out how to tell them. I promise I will though."

Nancy studied them for a long moment, then hung the phone back up. "If I see or hear anything weird happening, I'm calling Jonathan," she warned. Will nodded.

She left the living room. The four boys stared at each other in silence.

"You're sure she's alive?" Mike whispered. Will hesitated, then nodded.

He was so distracted he didn't realize Joyce had entered his office until she closed the door with a firm click. "Jesus!" he swore, scrambling for the remote to pause the tape. "Shit, Joyce, how long have you been there?"

She hid a laugh behind her hand. "Just a few minutes," she said.

He tried to smile, tried to shake off the weight on his shoulders and the images in his head. "You could have said something," he said.

"I did," she said. "What's got you so wrapped up?"

He turned off the TV. "Work," he said. "What's up? What brings you all the way out here?"

Joyce adjusted her purse on her shoulder. "I wanted to see if you wanted to stop by for dinner," she said.

"You could have called."

"I did. Four times." He sighed heavily, dragging his hand over his face. "What's got you so distracted?"

She reached for the nearest VHS tape. He lunged for it. "Joyce, don't-"

"Eleven, zero-two, fourteen, seventy-seven," she read aloud. She frowned and flipped the tape over. "Hawkins Power...and Light. Hopper, what the hell is this?"

He looked down at the scratched surface of his desk. "I took 'em," he said miserably. "After they cleared out of the lab. I dug around and took everything I could find about...her." He gestured broadly at the dusty crates stacked waist high along the wall. "There's tapes dating back to '72."

Joyce stared at him in horror. "Eleven?" she said, and he nodded reluctantly. "Hopper, she's dead. The gates to the Upside Down are closed. It's sad, it's so sad. And I hate that we lost that poor little girl. But we need to put this behind us and-"

"She's alive," he said, cutting her off. "The gateways are closed but she's in there and she's alive."

She dropped the tape like it was burning her fingers. "Are you serious?" she sputtered. "But she...the boys said...they were so sure!"

He shook his head. "I made a deal," he said quietly. "To get us into the Upside Down so we could get Will. I told them everything I knew, everything I saw. I didn't think..." His voice trailed off. "They didn't

tell me where she was or what happened to her until I'd already spilled."

"But we can get her out, right?" Joyce demanded. "If we can get Will, then-"

"There's no guarantee," he said. "I've been...I've been leaving her food. Every day. It's the least I can do."

Joyce traced her fingertips along the edge of the VHS. "Do the boys know?" she asked.

"No, and we're not telling them," he said. "Let them keep thinking it's over. If we can save her, great. If she dies out there...better that they didn't get their hopes up."

Joyce nodded, furtively swiping at her eyes. "That poor little girl," she whispered. "No one even told her goodbye." She looked down at the VHS box on the desk. "Is she...is she on the tapes?"

"They recorded everything," he said. "The experiments they did on her, surveillance from when they left her alone in her room, recordings from-"

He broke off midsentence. Joyce didn't need to know about the tapes of Eleven alone in solitary confinement, night vision recordings of a little girl locked in a tiny pitch black cell for hours and days and weeks while she cried for someone to come save her. But Joyce didn't notice.

"I need to see," she said quietly.

"Joyce, you don't-"

"I need to see it," she repeated, a little more firmly. She fixed her gaze on him, her chin lifted.

He leaned back in his chair and hit the power button on the television. If she wanted to see, she was going to see.

The screen flickered into static before settling into the figure of a small girl, dressed in a hospital gown with her long hair draped

around her shoulders. She sat on an uncomfortable metal chair, her short thin legs dangling, and her feet were bare. Her eyes were blank, staring past the camera like she was envisioning herself somewhere far away. She couldn't have been more than five years old.

Joyce grabbed onto Hopper's bicep and squeezed hard.

Two technicians in white scrubs worked over her, one of them fiddling with a cap made of wires and silver discs and the other adjusting dials and levers on a machine loaded onto a cart. The tech holding the cap tried to force it over the little girl's head, holding her in place by the neck while he tried to shove it on. She winced in pain, her small face scrunching up, but she didn't make a sound.

"Try it now," the tech said, and the other one flipped a switch.

"Dr. Brenner, we can't get a good readout," the second one said. "Too much interference."

The first tech pulled the helmet away and the little girl yelped as several strands of hair came with it. A tall man in a dark suit walked into frame, and Joyce's nails dug deep into Hopper's arms.

"It's her hair," Brenner said. "Cut it off."

All the adults moved out of frame, leaving the little girl alone. She looked around, shrinking back in her chair, and a horrible shrieking noise grated in the background.

"Hold still," the tech said, and he set a razor to her scalp.

She screamed, flinging herself forward, and the man in the white coat caught her by the back of the neck. "Hold still!" he repeated impatiently.

Dr. Brenner stood beside the chair, hands behind his back. "Now Eleven," he said. "That's no way to behave."

She squirmed. "Papa," she said. "No. No."

Joyce's grip was physically painful now. Hopper rubbed his hand over his jaw. He'd already seen this particular tape before, but it still

didn't make it any easier to watch.

"You will sit still," Brenner said. "You do not get to say no. You're doing important work, remember?"

Eleven ran her little hand over her long wavy hair. "No," she whimpered. "No, Papa. Please."

Brenner knelt beside her. "Do not argue," he said. "Be obedient."

The razor revved again, and this time Eleven sat very still, the color draining from her face. The tech ran the razor over her scalp, and hair fell to the floor in long clumps, littering her shoulders and knees. It was short, clumsy work, and at the end Eleven was left with an uneven buzzcut, her soft brown hair shorn close to her head. The tech picked up the netting of wires and electrodes again and snapped it over her head.

"Try it now," he said, and the machine whirled to life.

Dr. Brenner patted Eleven's cheek with the tips of his fingers. "Stop crying," he said. "You know better."

Eleven's eyes welled up, a fat tear rolling down her cheek and plopping on her hands, tightly clenched on her knees. She unfolded her fingers just enough to tentatively touch a long lock of hair that trailed across her lap, and an audible sob broke from her throat.

Brenner pinched her in the soft space between her neck and her collarbone. "I said, no crying," he said sharply. Eleven swallowed hard, a tremor running through her small body, and then she went still, her shoulders dropping and her eyes going blank.

Hopper's arm ached from the tension in Joyce's clenched hand. "She was a baby," she whispered. "She was a baby, and they did this to her?"

He could hear the thickness of barely-contained tears in her voice and he paused the tape. "Joyce, it's okay-"

"It's not okay!" she burst out. "She's just a little girl! And I could have saved her, Hopp."

"We couldn't save her and Will, Joyce," he said quietly. "You know that. And Will-

"I know!" she said. "He's my boy. He's my baby. I had to save him. But Eleven...she didn't deserve this! Any of this!"

She looked back at the screen, at the frozen image of a terrified little girl with a shorn head, who should have been coloring and playing with dolls and attending kindergarten instead of being used as a human lab rat. "We need to find her," she said. "We need to find her, and we need to keep her."

"That's the plan," Hopper said. But he remembered the box in the woods full of food that had barely been touched, and the way the air of the upside down had clogged his throat, and he gritted his teeth.

Two nights later Will dreamed of Eleven.

She huddled beside him in the rotting remains of Castle Byers, her shoulders covered with tattered shreds of his old sleeping bag and her knees tucked up to her chest. He wasn't sure how long he'd been sitting there- an hour, a few days, a few seconds. "Are you okay?" he asked hesitantly, trying to break the silence.

She raised and lowered one shoulder. "Okay," she echoed. She was thinner than he remembered, and paler, and her skin was damp.

"Are...are you real?" he asked hesitantly.

She rested her chin on her knees, her eyes blank. "Not sure," she said.

Will scooted closer. "I can try to get you out," he said. "I can do it. I tested it. The last time I blinked into the upside down I brought a vine back with me. I can bring things to the right side up."

Eleven's lips tugged bitterly. "Bigger than a vine," she said.

"I know, but I can practice," Will said. "If I can get better, I can-

"There's not time," she said.

He grabbed her hand impulsively. "I can do it," he pleaded. Her

fingers were bony in his grip, slick with the slime of the upside down. "If they could rescue me, I can rescue you. I promise."

"No promises," she whispered. "No more."

She was beginning to fade around the edges like steam, and Will squeezed both of her hands tightly. "Eleven, I promise!" he said. "I'll get you out. I will!"

"Will?"

At first he thought it was his voice echoing, bouncing off the bleak dark puddle world of the upside down.

"Will, wake up."

Jonathan was calling for him. Will held onto Eleven desperately even as the darkness began to shift and whirl around him, changing from solid black to smudged pale colors.

Castle Byers began to vanish around them but Eleven was still there, still staring at him with wide eyes. "Will?" she breathed. Her fingers began to curl around his. "Will, I-"

Will opened his eyes to his own bedroom and Jonathan leaning over him. "Hey, bud, if you want a ride to the Wheelers' you've got five minutes to get ready," he said. "I've got to go to work."

Will groaned and rolled out of bed, rubbing the heels of his hands against his temples. "Okay, okay, just gimme a second," he said, wincing against the light winter sunshine filtering through his windows.

"You have another nightmare?" Jonathan asked. "About...you know."

Will nodded, coughing to clear his throat as he dug through his dresser drawers. "It's okay," he said. "It was just a dream."

You close your eyes against the solid black of the upside down, your chest aching like someone is ripping you apart, and when you open them again it's still dark, but it's different. The darkness of the upside down is wet and pervasive, sinking deep into your body, slick like oil,

but now the shadows around you are soft and velvety and suffocate you.

And then air hits your lungs, clean air, cold and sharp, and you gasp, clutching at your chest with the sudden shock of it. Brilliant white lights shine in your eyes and you cower, flinging your arms over your face. A truck thunders past, close enough that you feel hot exhaust on your bare legs and vibrations under your feet, and the driver blares the horn so loudly, deep and bright, that you're afraid you'll never hear again.

The vibrations settle. The air cools again. The light fades. You raise your head.

Your breath rattles in your chest and puffs into the air as you look around. Under your feet is mottled black asphalt. On either side are tall knotted pines, scraggly and patched with snow. The sky is steel gray but pale, the sun the faintest hint of warmth far on the horizon.

You are in the right side up.

You can't catch your breath. Two months of swallowing the thick soupy air of the upside down has left you with the odd sensation of drowning on land, and the air here is so clean and cold it feels like a knife.

But you are in the right side up at last.

You walk in a slow, hesitant circle, gazing at your surroundings. In the upside down you wandered aimlessly, knowing you were alone. Here is different. Here you might meet kind men who feed you burgers and ice cream, or shrill women who want to take you back to Papa.

A shudder runs down your spine. Papa. You might have killed him. And you're not sure if you regret it.

You need to find safety. You need to find Mike. He can hide you in his basement, give you clean clothes to wear and food to eat. Or Dustin, or even Lucas. They could help.

You think of Will, who you've never met in the right side up, and his

brother, who was so quiet and gentle but fierce. And you think of their mother, who held you and kissed you when you cried, and said you were a brave girl, a good girl. You think of the tall man with the sharp tongue and the sad eyes, who gave you his shirt when they pulled you from the bath and you couldn't stop shaking, and who built you the box in the woods where he left you food.

They can help you. You just have to find them.

You look around again, your lower lip trembling. Which way? How are you supposed to move forward? How can you stay safe?

Signs stand on one side of the road and your vision blurs as you stare at the words. You're not stupid, you know your letters. You know how to write "Eleven" and "Papa." But these words are unfamiliar, and you can't put them together.

You see a familiar combination at last. H-A-W-K-I-N-S. You saw that word emblazoned everywhere in the lab, and all over the town during your week of escape. And an arrow points down the road.

You take a step. Pain throbs through your body. The upside down, for all its faults, kept you in your dreamlike state where you felt little-pain, hunger, thirst. Now all you can feel is exhaustion seeping into your bones, and you want to lay down and close your eyes forever.

But you aren't safe, and so you take another step, and another, and the next time you look back the road sign is just a small square in the distance.

Author's Notes:

I've been sitting on this for a long time, and I figured I should get up the courage to post it. I'm pretty unsure of my writing nowadays, but I'm just really in love with Stranger Things.

I have the next chapter written and lots of scenes outlined, mostly because there's a distinct lack of hurt/comfort in this fandom and I DON'T UNDERSTAND WHY. So if you like hurt/comfort, please enjoy. And please prompt if you have prompts!

2. A Beginning Song

Disclaimer: Stranger Things belongs to Netflix and the Duffer Brothers, not me.

Mike peered over the edge of his gamemaster guide, hiding his frown. "Are you going to roll?" he asked impatiently.

Lucas studied the game board. "Shut up, I'm weighing my options," he said.

"What's there to weigh?" Dustin said, drumming his fingers on the table. "You're holding everything up. Will got so bored he's drawing again."

Mike glanced over at Will, who was absorbed in his sketchbook and didn't look up. He had it tilted at just the right angle that Mike couldn't see what he was drawing.

Footsteps thumped on the basement stairs. "Hey, guys, pizza's here," Nancy said, leaning over the railing.

"Make Lucas roll first!" Dustin said.

"Lunch will give me enough time to decide what I want to do."

"I don't think that's fair."

Mike got up from the table, following them, but Will stayed put. "Hey, Will, come on," he said. He still didn't look up. "Will, let's go-"

He froze. Will was sketching Eleven.

It was a good likeness, better than usual. But it wasn't just a simple sketch. Will had drawn her hunched over, her shoulders slumped and her chin resting on her knees, and she looked sad. Her clothes were torn and dirty and her cheek was bruised.

"Why are you drawing her?" Mike asked. His voice sounded strange in his own ears, like he was underwater. "Why did you make her look

like that?"

Will dropped his pencil. "Oh!" he said, hastily flipping the sketchbook closed. "I...I was just...it's not what it looks like."

"You didn't even know her," Mike said. "You barely even met her, how do you know what she looks like?"

Will stared at the closed cover of his sketchbook. "I saw her," he said in a small voice. "I mean, I see her a lot, in my dreams, but...this is what she looked like. Last time."

He slowly opened the sketchbook again. A lump rose in Mike's throat. "Did she talk to you?" he asked.

"A little," Will said. "I told her I was trying to get her out. She didn't believe me." He swallowed hard. "She said...no more promises."

Mike stared at the drawing of Eleven until his eyes blurred. "We have to get her out," he said. "Soon."

Will nodded. "Are you two coming?" Dustin shouted. "We're waiting!"

Will closed the sketchbook again and hugged it under his arm. "If you guys could get me out, we can get her out," he said.

Mike nodded, his heart squeezing painfully tight behind his ribs.

You're not sure how long you've been walking, but you know that if you stop you won't be able to start again. Your shoes were hand me downs from Mike that didn't fit well in the first place, and not only are your feet raw with blisters, the rubber is cracked and the canvas ripped to shreds. It might be better to walk barefoot at this point.

The sky overhead is gray tinged with blue, and the weak winter sunlight offers little to keep you warm. Your dress finally isn't wet with slime anymore, but the fabric is stiff and torn and scrapes against your cold skin.

Find me, you think. Find me.

Will promised, but Will still thinks you're in the upside down. Will

won't know where to look for you. No one does. No one knows you're here.

You cough hard into your cold cupped hands, your lungs constricting closed. The world around you tilts and spins for a moment, and you stumble to a stop to catch your breath. Your whole body throbs. You wish you could go back to not feeling anything.

The woods around you are sparse, the ground beneath the trees littered with thick wet leaves and clumps of dirty snow. The air smells like cold and rot and the metal of an impending storm. You trip over a branch, biting back a whimper, and when you catch your balance and look up you waver, nearly tumbling backwards.

Ahead of you stretches a sprawling concrete building, built into the hillside and only partially obscured by black naked trees. Your heart leaps into your mouth. You didn't find help. You found the lab.

You stumble back, wanting to run, but your legs feel like lead. You know you can't make a sound. One sound, one wrong move, and the white coats will be there to take you away, and the men with the guns, and Papa will look down at you and flick his head in a nod towards the closet, and they'll carry you off and lock you up in the dark, and it won't matter how you scream and cry, they won't let you out until it benefits them.

You press your fists to your mouth, biting back whimpers, and as you stare in wild horror at the building looming ahead you catch one small detail. Your brain clings to it desperately, trying to bring you back to your senses.

The gates are locked. The gates have always been closed, yes, and guarded, but never locked. Never wrapped in heavy chains and hooked closed with padlocks.

You still cover your mouth with your hands, but your wild panic begins to settle. The gates are locked. The guardhouse is empty. The lab is deserted.

You want to cry and laugh at the same time. They're gone. They're all gone, and you're safe. At least for now.

You struggle to catch your breath as your heartbeat starts to slow. Your pulse still thumps in your thin wrists and dizziness overwhelms you for a moment. You start to walk away, but you pause.

There's a bank of windows on the south wall, windows you were never permitted to look out of, and you stare at them, fixing your gaze until your body buzzes with electricity. The panes shatters in small brilliant explosions, following the line in quick succession. Glass shards rain down to the brittle brown grass below; the sunlight catches like small rainbows.

You nearly lose your balance and your body feels lighter, thinner, like you've been partially erased and you're fading away. Hot blood drips from your nose and over your lips and you wipe it away with the back of your shaking hand. You taste copper and you feel like you're going to pass out, and maybe you shouldn't have done that because you had so little strength left already, but your heart feels stronger.

You square your shoulders and grit your teeth and you turn away from the lab. Your knees buckle, but you keep walking.

Hopper didn't bother locking the car, shoving his keys deep into his pocket. His boots sank into the thick wet leaves as he headed deeper into the woods. The winter air was sharp and cold, but not freezing. Maybe they'd get more snow later.

He walked over to the box and crouched down, brushing off the leaves and dirt that had blown over it, and lifted the lid.

It was still full.

He rocked back on his heels and cursed under his breath. Two days ago he'd stocked the box with food- a peanut butter sandwich, a bottle of juice, a bag of grapes, some Eggos (always Eggos; if he had to hear the Wheeler kid repeat the damn story about Eleven and frozen waffles one more time he was going to shove an Eggo up his nose). None of it had been touched. The sandwich was limp and soggy and the grapes were soft and overripe.

"Dammit," he said aloud.

Ever since he'd found out that Eleven was still alive in the upside down, he'd come out at least a couple of times a week to leave her food. He hadn't been able to get much information from the lab tech that accidentally let it slip that she was there, but he at least knew she could access certain things from the right side up. He'd built the box, left her food, tried to leave her warmer clothes. Poor kid had to be freezing. The clothes were never touched- maybe they couldn't make it through the barrier; he didn't know how things worked- but the food was always eaten. He thought he could buy her some time, especially when what was left of Brenner's crew abandoned the lab. He thought he had time to scour the tapes and study the records he'd stolen. He could come up with a plan, get her out, bring her back. Redeem himself for leaving that baby to die protecting them, when that should have been his job in the first place.

But if she wasn't eating...if she was hurt, or sick, or lost, or...

He stood up and slammed the lid shut. The crack echoed in the silent woods. He was going to find her. No matter what, he was going to bring her back.

"Will? We're home. You can get out of the car now."

Will blinked. The last thing he remembered was packing his stuff up at Mike's house. Now he was sitting in the darkened driveway and Jonathan was staring at him curiously.

"Oh," he said. He scrambled to get out of the car. "I, uh, I must have dozed off."

He held his bag awkwardly as Jonathan unlocked the front door of the house and turned on the lights, but he lost his grip and the contents tumbled onto the floor. His sketchbook fell open, pages fluttering like oddly shaped wings. Jonathan bent to help him pick everything up and hesitated.

"You drew Eleven?" he said.

Will looked down at the drawing. "Um...yeah," he said.

"It's good," Jonathan commented. "Looks just like her." He paused.

"Did you have to make her look so sad, though?"

A lump rose in Will's throat. He'd drawn her exactly the way he'd seen her last, from his dream the night before. "I, um, I dunno," he stammered as he hastily closed the sketchbook. "What are we doing for dinner?"

Jonathan scowled. "I don't know," he said. "I think the chief's coming over again."

"You know Mom said we can call him Jim," Will reminded him.

Jonathan's scowl deepened. "Whatever," he said, and he stomped back into the kitchen.

Will sighed. His mom and the police chief had been...not exactly dating. Seeing each other. Spending a lot of time together. Jim came over at least once a week for dinner. And he helped out a lot with repairing the house. The carpet in the hall had been ripped up and replaced, the ugly torn wallpaper had been torn down and repainted, and he'd taken down Lonnie's ramshackle tarp and duct tape patch over the hole in the wall and fixed it up properly- studs and drywall and new siding. And sure, the chief was kind of gruff and his people skills were rusty, but he made his mother happy, happier than she'd been in a long time. He could put with a lot of worse options than the chief if it meant his mother would be happy.

The front door creaked open. "Boys?" Joyce said. "I'm home!"

"Hi, Mom!" he called.

Joyce hung up her coat on the hook by the door and swept him into a hug. "Hi, baby," she said, kissing his cheek. "How was your day? How are you feeling?"

"Fine," he said.

"Did you need to use your inhaler at all?"

He squirmed a little under her concerned gaze. His time in the upside down had left him with a thick lingering cough for a long time. And of course, she still didn't know about...what exactly he was coughing

up. "I'm fine," he said. "I didn't need it at all today."

She beamed at him and brushed his hair back from his forehead. "Where's Jonathan?" she asked.

"In the kitchen."

She kissed his forehead again and flitted off. "Jonathan!" she said cheerfully.

Will shouldered his bag and headed down the hall to his room. His dog Sam was curled up at the foot of the bed; he raised his head and yelped a greeting when he walked in. "Hey, boy," Will said, dropping his bag on his bed and scratching Sam behind the ears. "You miss me?"

Suddenly the familiar cold prickle crawled up his spine. He froze, his fingers cracking, and when he blinked he was back in the upside down.

Sam was gone and his bed was soaked through and molding. The walls around him crumbled with decay and hung heavy with vines. Will took a deep breath to steady himself and coughed at the sudden onslaught of thick soupy air.

"Eleven?" he croaked. He cleared his throat, tried again. "Eleven?"

No answer.

But she always answered. She always showed up. It was like she waited for those brief moments, she was always prepared for them.

"Eleven!" he shouted, his voice echoing and sinking into the thick air.

And he knew. He absolutely knew, deep down in the pit of his chest.

"Eleven!" he screamed at the top of his lungs, his voice cracking, and he dug his fingers into the side of his rotting bed. And suddenly his bed wasn't rotting and wet anymore, it was normal again, and his dog was looking at him with his head tilted to the side in curiosity, and he was still screaming.

"Will!"

His mother ran into the room and grabbed him. He wrapped his arms tightly around her neck, his screams dying down into panicked gasps. Joyce pulled him into her lap and rubbed his back. He buried his face in her shoulder, his fingers scrabbling to grip her sweater. For a moment he let himself be a little kid, to cry into his mother's shoulder and let himself be comforted. Let himself pretend that all of this could be fixed with a hug and a promise to check for monsters under his bed.

"It's okay, sweetie, it's okay," Joyce murmured, rubbing his back firmly. "I'm here. You're all right."

He held onto her tightly, his eyes boring into the wall behind her shoulder. She smelled comforting, like Dove soap and cigarette smoke, but he couldn't keep pretending like everything was going to be okay. "She's gone," he said, his voice raw and rasping.

"Who's gone, baby?"

"Eleven." He pulled back to look her in the eyes and saw the concern written all over her face. "She's gone. She's not in the upside down anymore."

Joyce glanced nervously behind her. "Oh, honey," she said. "I know you're still sad, but she didn't make it. And you've been out of the upside down in months. You're safe."

He shook his head, nausea rising in the back of his throat. "She's not dead, she was never dead," he insisted. "She was in the upside down and I was there too and now I can't find her. She's gone."

Joyce touched his forehead. "Honey, I think you're-

"No!" he shouted, jumping up and away from her, and Sam let out a small concerned bark. "She was there and now she's gone!"

"What's all the shouting about?"

Will looked up to see Jim Hopper in the doorway, frowning. Jonathan hovered behind him. "He let himself in," Jonathan said,

clearly irritated. "When did he get his own key?"

Hopper brushed him aside. "Who's gone?" he asked.

"He had a nightmare about Eleven," Joyce explained.

"It wasn't a dream!" Will burst out. "I can go in and out of the upside down, and I've seen her, and she's gone!" He took a deep breath. "I know it's crazy, I know Mike and Lucas and Dustin saw her die, but she's alive. And now she's missing."

There was a long pause. Joyce looked nervously from him to Hopper and back again. "We know she's alive," she confessed.

"Wait, what?" Jonathan said, unfolding his arms. "The kids said she killed the demogorgon and broke into a thousand pieces."

Hopper sighed heavily. "She's alive," he said. "Trapped in the upside down, but alive."

"But not anymore," Will said. "She's not there. She's gone. I know it. I've been there."

The room fell painfully, thickly silent. Hopper threw his hat aside and dropped it on the dresser. "Start from the beginning," he said in a low voice.

Will did. He started from the first time he blinked out and found himself in the upside down again, the first time he vomited a slug and hastily got rid of the evidence. Hopper and Jonathan and Joyce listened in intense silence, watching him carefully. He talked too fast, words spilling in his haste to get them out, but no one stopped him, no one asked questions.

"I think I pulled her out on accident," he said, his voice raspy. "I was holding her hand when I started to come back, and I guess I brought her with me."

"Then where is she?" Joyce asked, eyes wide.

He shrugged helplessly. "You saw her in the woods, right?" Hopper said. "Then she has to still be there. Somewhere."

"We need to look for her," Will said. "We have to find her before someone else does."

He glared at them, half expecting them to argue. But Joyce looked down at her hands on her lap, then up at Jonathan and Hopper.

"We'll need a plan," she said. "And backup."

You thought you were tired before, but exhaustion has sunk so far into your bones that you're not sure how you're still moving. Blood is seeping through your tattered shoes and you can feel every rock and stick and stone you step on. Your muscles ache fiercely. Before you escaped the lab you were barely allowed to walk laps around the facility; your body isn't used to running and climbing. Sometimes your knees shake so badly that you stumble, but you keep going. You have no other choice.

It's cold now. It's been chilly since the sun rose, hours ago, but the sun is sinking and the sky is a dark steel gray. A storm is coming; you can taste it on your tongue. The wind whips at you mercilessly, tangling your thin torn dress around your legs and stinging your exposed skin. Your nose and your fingers have been numb for hours now, and the rest of you is ice cold. You've forgotten what it feels like to be warm.

You limp into a clearing bisected by a rundown wire fence. There's a sign that you can't read and a hole large enough for a child your size to slip through. You climb through awkwardly, your arms and legs clumsy and uncoordinated, and you wince when the barbed wire catches your shin and rips a long jagged cut. It's so cold you can barely feel it, but it still stings.

You walk unsteadily through the brittle grass until the trees begin to thin out and you find yourself in a wide field. There's a big shed a short distance away, with a rusted pickup truck parked in front of it, and a farmhouse beyond that. You pause, swaying on your feet. It's unfamiliar. You don't know who lives here. Maybe they'll be helpful, maybe not.

While you're debating a man tromps out of the shed, muttering to himself. You freeze. *Run*, you think. *I should run*.

Before you can force your wooden legs to move the man spots you. "Hey!" he bellows, his voice echoing in the emptiness. "Hey, what're you doing here?"

You can't move. You stare blankly at the stranger. *Danger. Danger. You need to run*, your mind screams frantically. But you stand there stupidly.

The man reaches into the back of the pickup and grabs up a shotgun. "The sign says no trespassing!" he shouts. "Get outta here!"

You run. You turn on your heel and tear off into the woods, but the man follows you. You can hear his heavy footsteps behind you, closer closer *closer*, and you hear the pump and click of the shotgun.

You spin around, your breath raw in your throat, and he's brandishing the shotgun. Without thinking you throw your hand forward, palm out, fingers locking, and the shotgun jerks in the man's grip and fires, scattering buckshot harmlessly into the wind. You feel sudden pressure in your sinuses, so heavy for a split second that you can't see straight, and then the thick pop of blood clots exploding in your nose. It runs down your face and pours over your mouth and chin, saturating your tongue with the taste, and you whine in the back of your throat. But the man is cursing and fumbling to reload, and you break into a run again.

You shouldn't have done that. Your head swims and you're swallowing blood and it's pouring from your ears now too, and you can't breathe. But you know you didn't have another choice.

You climb back through the gap in the fence and keep going, your aching legs pumping and your ragged shoes sliding through the depths of wet leaves and molding underbrush. It's starting to rain now, cold water dripping down the back of your neck, and you keep going.

But you fall. You lose your balance and tumble forwards, skinning your palms, scraping a layer of skin off your knees, and it hurts, it stings, and you can't breathe, and you want to go home, but you don't have a home. You have nowhere to go, and no one is looking for you.

You raise your head, your shoulders heaving, and you see it. Castle Byers. The rundown, ramshackle little fort that Will put together. In the upside down it was rotting and decaying, barely a semblance of a shelter, but here it's small and sturdy and welcoming.

You push yourself up again, wincing when mud seeps into the scrapes in your palms, and you stumble drunkenly towards the safety of the fort until you can throw yourself inside. It's not the best shelter from the rain; cold sleet still drips through the cracks in the roof. But it's quiet, and there's walls around you now, and you collapse onto the blankets and pillows that Will left behind in the summertime.

You roll over onto your back, chest heaving in an effort to breathe, and you stare dizzily at the roof. Through the cracks you can see the darkening sky, the first signs of the stars, and you smile a little to yourself. You made it out of the lab. You made it out of the upside down. You made it into clear skies and clean air and peace. And even if no one is looking for you, you know where you are at last.

You close your eyes as snowflakes filter down and brush against your cheeks like promises, and everything goes still and silent and dark.

Author's Notes:

Well, that took a little longer than I thought to post- I wrapped a run of Seussical the Musical (I played Gertrude McFuzz!) and immediately started rehearsals for Candlelight Processional at Disney- and that held me up. I hope you're enjoying this though! Please feel free to leave feedback; I love hearing from people! And if you want to leave a prompt or chat or anything my tumblr and my instagram are both [themetaphorgirl](#).

3. I'll Keep You Safe

Disclaimer: Stranger Things belongs to the Duffer Brothers and Netflix, not me.

"Nancy, phone!"

Nancy got up from the couch and Mike scowled at her as the cushions shifted. He drew his knees up to his chest and leaned his chin on his hand. "Mom, why'd you let Holly pick what we're watching?" he complained. "She's not even paying attention and I don't want to watch Care Bears for a million hours."

Holly didn't even glance up from her collection of Barbie dolls strewn across the living room floor. "Sweetheart, it's fine," Karen sighed. "She'll go to bed in a little bit anyway." She got up from her chair and squeezed his shoulder in passing. "I'm going to do some laundry. Did you bring your hamper down?"

"Yeah," he grumbled.

Karen paused. "And honey, can we take down your little fort in the basement?" she said. "We need to pack up the Christmas stuff and it's in the way."

"No!" he exclaimed, leaping up. "Mom, you can't, it's Eleven's."

Holly looked up at his raised voice, dropped her Skipper doll, and then stared at it in confusion. Karen knelt down in front of Mike. "Honey, I know you're still upset," she said softly. "But eventually you have to let her go." She brushed a lock of hair away from his forehead. "Remember how sad I was when Grandpa died? But after a while it stopped hurting so much."

"She's not dead, Mom," he said. "She's not. She's coming back."

His mother's expression radiated sympathy and pity and he glared at her. "I know you're sure, but in the meantime, maybe you can take down the fort?" she said.

He shook his head. "I want things to be the same as she left, whenever she comes back," he said. "She's going to come back."

Karen exhaled heavily. "Okay," she said with the long suffering patience of a mother humoring her child's whims. She patted his knee and stood up. "I'll be in the basement if you need me."

He curled back into his corner of the couch, huffing in irritation. Holly looked up and held out a Barbie doll. "Mike, be Midge?" she inquired.

"No, Holly," he said. "I'm not gonna play Barbies with you."

She rolled her eyes and picked up her dolls. Mike leaned back, resigning himself to watching Care Bears until 7:30 rolled around and it was time to for his little sister to go to bed. And then Nancy ran into the room.

"Mike, wonderland," she said.

He wrinkled his nose at her, but her eyes were wide and her face was pale and she clutched the phone receiver in a death grip, the cord stretched its full length from the kitchen.

"*Wonderland*," she repeated.

And then it sank in.

The code. It was the code.

"Are you serious?" he demanded, half rising from the couch.

She nodded. "Jonathan called. We need to go," she said. "Get your supercomm."

Mike jumped up and ran for the hall closet, grabbing his shoes and his coat, his hands shaking, his heart in his mouth. "Jonathan, we'll be right over," Nancy said into the phone. "Yeah, maybe fifteen minutes. Yeah."

She ran into the kitchen and hung up the phone with a loud click. "Nancy, careful," Ted called from the den.

Nancy reached into the closet over Mike's head for her coat. "I'm going to grab some of my old stuff from the basement," she said. "Just in case she needs anything."

"Yeah, better to be safe than sorry," Mike said as he jammed his converses on without bothering to untie and tie the laces. He jumped up and followed Nancy down the stairs, her boots clattering loudly on the wooden steps.

"What on earth are you two doing?" Karen asked, jumping in surprise as they ran past. "Why do you have your coats on?"

Nancy tore the tape off a cardboard box marked with her name. "It's a long story but we've got to go," she said, rummaging through the neatly packed clothes.

"No ma'am, not at this hour," Karen said firmly. "It's already dark out and it's starting to snow."

"Mom, we have to," Mike said.

"Why?" she asked. "What's so important?"

Mike squared his shoulders. "Eleven's back," he said. "She's missing and we need to find her."

The pitying look crossed his mother's face again. "Mike..."

"Mom, don't look at me like that!" he shouted. "She's out there! She's lost and we have to find her!"

Karen opened her mouth to argue. "Mom, we're going," Nancy said, standing at Mike's side with her arms laden down with clothes. "Jonathan and his family are already out there and they need help. And Chief Hopper's there too."

Karen shifted her weight, her gaze falling on the little blanket fort against the back wall. "I know you two have gone through a lot, and I know you want her to come back," she said. "But Mike, honey, she's dead."

"She's not!" Mike said. His eyes pricked with tears and he gritted his

teeth. "She's not dead!"

Nancy squeezed his shoulder. "I'll take care of him," she said. "If it's too late or not safe to drive home we'll stay at the Byers' house. I'll call. Every thirty minutes if you want. But we have to go."

Karen hesitated. "Please," Mike said. "Mom. Please."

She bit her lip. "Be careful," she said at last. "I'll...I'll come up with something to tell your father." She turned to Nancy. "Do not let anything happen to your brother."

"I won't," Nancy promised.

"Dress warm," Karen warned.

"We will," Mike said.

"And-"

"We've got to go," Mike interrupted. He turned and ran up the stairs, his heart thumping against his ribcage. They were going to find Eleven. They were going to bring her home.

Hopper sketched out a rough layout of the woods with thick black slashes across a page torn from Will's sketchbook. "We'll split up," he said. "Me and Joyce, Jonathan and Will, Mike and Nancy."

"Are you sure splitting up is the best idea?" Joyce worried.

"It'll be better in pairs," Hopper said. "We'll cover more ground and no one will be left alone." He tossed down the black permanent marker and picked up a red one. "Will, do you have any idea where she might be? Anywhere we can narrow it down?"

He shook his head. "No," he said. "Just...the woods. It's where I saw her in the upside down, so if I pulled her out that's probably where she ends up in the right side up."

Hopper sketched across the page, the bright red ink seeping into the paper and bleeding against the black and white. "Joyce and I will go north," he said. "You two will go west. And Nancy and Mike-"

Someone pounded heavily at the front door. Joyce got up from the couch and opened it and the Wheeler kids tumbled inside. "Where is she?" Mike demanded, running over to them. Nancy dropped her backpack on the floor and followed at his heels.

"Will thinks she's somewhere in the woods," Jonathan said.

"We have to work fast," Hopper said. "It's already dark and it's sleeting outside. We can be out until-" He glanced at the clock. "-ten. At ten, no matter what, we're all heading back inside."

"What about Dustin and Lucas, should we call them?" Will asked.

"I don't want to put more kids in jeopardy than I already have," Hopper said dryly. "If we don't find her tonight, we'll call them up and head out first thing in the morning."

"Everyone, though, everyone has to stay in pairs," Joyce said. "No splitting up. Jonathan, you'll-"

"I'll stay with Will," he promised.

Nancy leaned forward, her hands on the table. "Do we have any weapons?" she asked.

"No, no weapons," Joyce said firmly, shaking her head.

"I've got my gun," Hopper said. "Do you guys still have the baseball bats with the nails?"

"Hopp!" Joyce said, scandalized.

"In the shed, I'll grab 'em," Jonathan said, getting up from the table.

"Jonathan, no. Hopp, I don't want the kids to have weapons!" Joyce said.

Hopper opened his mouth to argue but Will beat him to it. "Mom, it's better to be safe than sorry," he said. "We don't know if anything followed her out of there."

Joyce sighed heavily. "Just...just be careful," she said. She looked

from Will to Nancy to Mike. "All of you."

Jonathan walked back in, holding two baseball bats at arms' length. He handed one to Nancy, who hefted it easily. "I brought my supercomm," Mike said, setting it out.

Will picked it up and spun the dial. "Will's got his too, you'll be on the same channel as my radio," Hopper said. "Whoever finds Eleven, stay with her. We'll come to you. Will was in the upside down for a week and it nearly killed him; she's been there for two months, and who knows how long she's been out in the woods now. She's probably going to be in bad shape."

"Everybody stay together," Hopper said. "Don't do anything stupid. Radio if you see anything."

The kids nodded solemnly. Hopper crossed to the back door, threw it open, and walked into the darkness.

Jonathan gripped the handle of the bat so hard his knuckles turned white. He kept looking around, watching for signs of movement. Will walked calmly in front of him with the radio in one hand and his flashlight in the other.

"If we see a demogorgon, it'll only be a baby one," Will said calmly. "Eleven killed the only full-grown one."

"How do you know that?" Jonathan said.

Will fell silent. "I've been going in and out of the upside down for a while," he confessed. "I, um...I haven't seen any of the big ones. Neither has Eleven."

Jonathan shifted his bat from one hand to the other. "How long have you been able to go in and out?" he asked.

Their shoes crunched over thin gray snow and brittle broken tree limbs. "It started the day after I got out of the hospital," Will said. "It didn't last long, but it happened."

Jonathan's stomach flipped unpleasantly. "And you didn't tell anyone?" he said, his voice coming out harsher than he meant.

"I didn't want you and Mom to worry," he said. "At least not more than you already were."

Jonathan bit back a sharp reply. Will had lived his whole life being the good kid to keep them from worrying about him, not when they already had enough on their plates. Before he'd gone missing he'd hardly done more than failing one math test in the sixth grade. But when they'd gotten him back from the upside down he'd been sick, and there were hospital bills, and the house needed repairs, and reporters were hounding them for photos or interviews with the boy who came back to life...

Of course Will didn't say anything.

"I got better at it though," Will offered. "Jumping in and out. I could stay longer. And I can control it sometimes. Sometimes I can't, especially when it happens when I'm dreaming."

"But you haven't seen any demogorgons?" Jonathan pressed. "The big full grown ones?"

Will was silent for a long time. The wind whistled overhead, bending the trees and pulling at their coats and blowing sharp cold sleet at their bare faces.

"No," Will said. "I haven't."

"Over here," Nancy said, beckoning Mike forward.

He scowled. "You don't have to boss me around," he said. "I've been out in these woods more than you. I probably have a better idea of where we are."

Nancy gestured broadly at the dark barren trees surrounding them. "Well?" she said expectantly. "Then where are we?"

Mike hesitated. "I'm, uh...not exactly sure," he confessed.

Nancy sighed heavily, dropping her arms. The bat hung at her side. "Look, I'm not trying to boss you around," she said. "We just need to get in, find Eleven, and get out as fast as we can. The sleet is picking up."

Mike looked up at the black sky. "Yeah," he said. His pale skin looked whiter in the faint moonlight; snow collected on his cheekbones.

"Are you okay?" Nancy asked.

He shook his head, wet clumps of snow falling from his hair, and stomped ahead. "Fine," he said.

Nancy followed him. She hadn't remembered to change into her boots before she left and her sneakers were soaked. "Are you worried?" she asked.

He turned around sharply, walking backwards. "No!" he said. "Not worried at all! I haven't been worried one bit for months! Everything's fine!"

It would have been comical in other circumstances. Sometimes Mike acted younger than his twelve years, playing with his dinosaurs and action figures, complete with requisite sound effects, and sometimes he sounded like a jaded teenager already. But he was almost thirteen, and soon his toys would be packed away or given to Holly, and he'd be just like her, drowning in a mire of hormones and exams and college applications and first loves.

She stepped carefully through the underbrush. "Mike?" she said. "I know you've been hoping that Eleven didn't die-"

"She's not dead."

She kept going. "And I know you've gotten your hopes up, but...there's always a chance that...well, that she's gone," she said.

"But she's not."

"She might be."

"Chief Hopper says the lab people says she's alive. He's been leaving her food, and she's been eating it-"

"It could have been wild animals, Mike."

"But it's not!"

Mike stopped. "But I know her!" he shouted desperately. "I know her. She would come back if she could! And I promised-" He stopped. "I promised..."

Nancy carefully propped her baseball bat against the tree. "It's okay," she said. "Hey. Mike. It's okay."

She took him gingerly by the shoulders and hugged him, awkwardly crushing the flashlight and the radio between them. He hugged her back, and she realized with a start that he was tall enough to lean his chin on her shoulder.

He pulled away first and she let him go. "I promised her," he repeated, his voice a little steadier but his eyes red. "I told her I'd keep her safe, and she could come live with us, and she wouldn't have to go hungry again, and our mom could be her mom-"

"Mike, Dad will never go for that," Nancy said softly. "You know that."

"Maybe not," Mike shot back. "Besides, where would she go if we didn't?"

"Foster care, probably," Nancy said without thinking.

Mike scowled. "Once we find her we're keeping her," he said. "Someone has to." His expression softened, and suddenly he was a vulnerable twelve-year-old again. "I told her I'd take her to the Snow Ball."

Nancy sighed heavily. "Let's keep moving," she said, shouldering her bat again. "The sooner we find her the sooner we can go inside and get warm, and the sooner you can take her to the Snow Ball."

"The Snow Ball was in December," Mike said, scowling. He glanced around the woods, the beam of his flashlight bouncing off the trees. "We went into the woods a few times when she was here, but I doubt she knows which way to go."

"Do you think she would go somewhere she'd gone before?" Nancy said.

Mike shrugged. "Maybe," he said. "The quarry, or near the lab, or-" He stopped. "Oh my god."

"What?" Nancy said, startled.

He took off running, the flashlight swinging wildly in his hand. "Mike!" she shouted. "Michael Wheeler!"

She slid in a slick pile of slush and dead leaves. "Mike!" she shouted. "Where the hell are you going?"

The flashlight's beam shook like a strobe as he ran into the darkness. "Castle Byers!" he called back, and even though she didn't know what he meant, she ran after him.

Was Will dressed warmly enough? She couldn't remember. What was he wearing? His heaviest coat, or just his windbreaker? And did Jonathan put fresh batteries in the radio? Oh god, what if their batteries died? Or on Mike's radio; Karen Wheeler would never forgive her if she put those two children in harm's way.

Hopper took her by the elbow, breaking her reverie. "Hole," he said shortly, guiding her around it.

"Sorry," Joyce apologized, clinging to his arm.

"You're going to worry yourself into an early grave, you know," Hopper said.

She didn't let go of his arm. "I can't help it," she said. "I know that for everything I worry about there's at least five things I've forgotten to worry about it." She sighed. "Jonathan is a better parent than I am most of the time. Sometimes I think he's the one taking care of me instead of the other way around."

She paused, horrified. "Sorry, I didn't...I didn't mean to say that," she said.

Hopper didn't say anything, but his silence was calm and reassuring. Her hand still gripped his sleeve and his bicep was warm and strong under her palm. "You've had a lot on your plate," he said mildly. "And Jonathan's a good kid."

"Yeah," she said. "Ever since Lonnie walked out-" She stopped. "Sorry. I, um...I'm not good at this conversation thing anymore."

She laughed self-consciously but he didn't. "You're fine, Joyce," he said.

She felt silent, still gripping his arm. The storm was starting in earnest now, rain and snow mixing in a cold downpour that soaked her hair and pelted her face. She thought of the kids and hoped they were still warm.

She thought of Eleven and the last time she saw her. They had pulled her out of the slapdash sensory deprivation tank, water sluicing off her thin pink dress. She had been shaking so badly she could barely stand; Hopper had dressed her gently in his own plaid flannel shirt and the boys had tucked a blanket around her. And then she was left behind, and Joyce didn't even think about her until she was told the little girl was dead.

"Hopp?" she ventured. He grunted in reply. "You're sure she's alive?"

"Positive," he said. "They told me they had been able to track her into the upside down, but they lost contact and the gates were closed. They gave up."

"They left her there?" Joyce breathed. "No one was looking for her?"

Her heart seized at the thought of returning to the upside down- the thick darkness, the slime and the muck, the sickly sweet smell of rotting flowers, the way the air sat heavy on her lungs.

"They told me...that leaving her there was cheaper and easier than decommissioning Project Eleven," Hopper said grimly.

"Decommissioning?" Joyce repeated. "What does that mean?"

Hopper didn't say anything else, but he squeezed her hand, a little too tight. A chill ran down her spine, but it wasn't from the storm. All she could see was the terror in Eleven's eyes when they pulled her out of the bath. She remembered the way the girl clung to her desperately, choking on little half-swallowed sobs.

Decommissioned.

Decommissioned.

Joyce's blood ran cold. She let go of Hopper's arm and looked down at her watch. Nine o'clock. Two hours till they called off the search for the night.

They had to find her.

He couldn't explain. He didn't want to explain it. It just...it made sense.

He ran as fast as he could, the radio and the flashlight weighing him down, his sneakers slipping and skidding on the wet underbrush. The sleet struck him harder now, like a rain of needles. But he didn't care.

Eleven knew about the fort. She had been there, looking for Will. Will had drawn her hiding there, looking lost and sad. He had to check. Maybe he was wrong, maybe it was a wild goose chase, maybe she was on the opposite side of the woods or in the quarry or frozen to death somewhere or hell, maybe everyone's theories were wrong and she really did die in the classroom two months ago and he's been vividly hallucinating ever since.

He could see the little fort in the middle of the clearing. "Eleven," he called. His voice came out thin and wobbly. "Eleven!"

He skidded to a stop in front of the fort. His heart thudded in his ribcage. He held his breath, drew the curtain back from the doorway, and with a shaking hand pointed the flashlight inside.

In the center of the little fort was Eleven.

She was lying on her back like a broken doll, sprawled on the ground, her arms flung above her head, the skirt of her dress fanned out like flower petals. Her eyes were closed and her skin was eerily white. Blood dried black coated her nose and ears; her exposed skin was filthy and her clothes were worse.

Mike crept closer, the supercomm slipping from his hand. "Eleven?" he whispered, his voice cracking.

He fell on his knees beside her. He'd imagined finding her again, in so many ways and different scenarios, but he never imagined it like this.

He couldn't tell if she was breathing. She was so pale and so still...maybe she was dead. He stretched out a trembling hand and pressed his fingers to the side of her neck, searching for a pulse like he'd seen on TV. But he felt nothing.

Bile rose in the back of his throat. He leaned over her, hovering, his cheek an inch, maybe two, from her barely parted lips. And he waited.

It was so faint that he could barely feel it, but he did- soft warm breath against his cheek. She was alive.

"Eleven," he said, leaning back on his arms. "Elle, come on. Wake up. I'm here."

He dared to brush her hair back from her forehead; in two months her short buzzcut had just started to grow out. Her hair was stiff and matted.

"Elle, come on," he pressed. "You're gonna be okay. I promise." A lump rose in his throat. "It's okay."

The curtain was drawn back sharply from the doorway. "Michael Theodore Wheeler, what the actual hell!" Nancy said. "I told Mom I would keep an eye on you, and I told Mrs. Byers, and-" She stopped.

"She's alive," Mike said. "But she won't wake up."

Nancy snatched up the supercomm and forced it into his hands. "Get on the radio and tell them," she commanded.

Mike took it in shaking hands as Nancy bent over Eleven. "I found her," he said. "Guys, I found her."

The supercomm crackled to life almost immediately. "Where?" Hopper demanded.

"Castle Byers," Mike said.

"That's due north," Will chimed in.

"Is she all right?" Hopper asked.

Nancy gestured for the radio and Mike handed it over. "She's unconscious," she reported. "She's breathing but it's really faint. Her pulse is slow. But I don't see any major injuries or broken bones."

"Will, you said the fort is north?" Hopper asked.

"Right."

"I want everybody but Mike to head back to the house," Hopper commanded, the voice of a man accustomed to giving orders. "Go inside, get warmed up, wait for us to get back with Eleven. Will, stay on the radio and give me directions. Mike, stay with Eleven. Get her covered up as best you can. If you can get her to wake up, keep her awake. I'll be there as soon as I can. Keep the radio on you. Keep me updated if anything happens."

"Ten-four," Mike said.

Nancy handed him the radio. "Stay here," she said sternly. "Do whatever Chief Hopper tells you." He nodded. "Be careful. Take good care of Eleven."

He nodded again. She leaned over to hug him, then pressed her hand over Eleven's cold fingers. Then she slipped out of the fort, and Mike was alone with Eleven.

He crept a little closer to her. The cracks in the roof had let snow and sleet trickle in and cover her. He brushed it away and dug around for a blanket, tucked under the sleeping bag, that was mostly clean and only slightly damp, and draped it over her.

He leaned over her, watching her pale face. It had been so long since he'd seen her that he was afraid he'd forgotten what she looked like, but no. He had her memorized.

"You need to wake up," he whispered. "I'm here now, okay? I kept my promise." He tentatively rubbed her thin arm. "Elle?"

He was struck by the image of her lying there like the princess from Holly's Disney storybook, fast asleep and waiting. But he didn't dare kiss her, at least not on the lips. He kissed her on the forehead instead, his eyes sliding closed as his lips barely brushed her cold skin.

"Please wake up," he whispered, his eyes still shut.

He leaned back, swallowing hard, and he saw her lashes flutter.

"Elle?" he whispered.

Her eyes cracked open slowly. She gazed up at him, her brown eyes soft and cloudy.

"Mike," she breathed.

"Yeah," he said. His chest felt like it had been stretched out too tight and only now was he allowed to relax. "Yeah, it's me."

She blinked slowly. The whites of her eyes were bloodshot. "Safe?" she whispered.

"Uh-huh, you're safe," he reassured her. "No bad men. No demogorgons." She blinked again, the ghost of a smile on her blue lips. "Chief Hopper's coming, remember him? We're going to take you back to Will's house. I think his mom is going to take care of you. His mom's really nice, just a little scatterbrained sometimes. But, oh yeah, you already met her."

He couldn't stop talking and he couldn't stop smiling. She was here. She was alive. "Everything is going to be okay," he said.

The wind blew with a sharp high whistle, rattling the trees and the ramshackle roof over their heads, and Mike shivered. "Are you cold?" he asked.

She shook her head slowly. "That's not good," he said. "You're probably so cold you can't feel it." Her eyes were starting to look glazed over in the thin glow of the flashlight. "I'm going to lie down beside you. Is that okay?"

She nodded a little. He cautiously eased himself down beside her and drew the blanket over them both. "You've got stay warm," he said. He hesitated. "Is it..can I hug you? Is that okay?"

She didn't answer but she tilted her head until her cheek reached his shoulder. Mike wrapped his arms around. "It'll be all right," he said. "They're coming to get us. You'll be okay." He looked up at the ceiling, at the gaps in the roof and the dark night sky and the pinpricks of stars, and he was keenly, painfully aware of how still and cold Eleven was beside him. "Just hold on, okay?"

Author's Notes:

WELL THEY FOUND HER.

Now they have to get her back safely. And hope there aren't any demogorgons around. And hope that if Brenner is still alive, he doesn't find out they have her.

Please feel free to send me any constructive feedback you have! If you don't like what I'm writing, it's cool, you don't have to read it. But if you'd like to give me thoughts on things you'd like to see or things I could improve on, I'd love to hear it! Thanks, friends!

And special thanks to Allie and Margaret for betaing for me!

4. Kingdom Come

Disclaimer: Stranger Things belongs to the Duffer Brothers and Netflix, not me.

Joyce waited on the porch, arms folded across her chest, tapping her feet anxiously as she scanned back and forth across the backyard. She saw the boys first first, tromping through the patches of snow. "Jonathan?" she called, her arms dropping to her sides. "Will?" She took a few steps down the stairs. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah, we're okay," Will called back. "Just cold."

She took him by the shoulder and squeezed Jonathan's arm. "Go inside and warm up," she said.

"Mom, we're fine," Jonathan protested. "And someone needs to wait for Nancy."

"I will," she said.

"And someone needs to give Chief Hopper directions!" Will said.

"I can do that too," Joyce said, tugging the radio from his hands. "Go. Both of you. Get warmed up."

"What about you?" Jonathan asked.

She sighed, drumming her fingers on the radio. "I'll go in as soon as Nancy's back," she said. "Now don't make me say it again."

The boys both huffed in protest, but obediently trooped inside. Joyce fiddled with the supercomm. "Nancy?" she said. "How close are you, sweetie?"

It was silent for a moment. Joyce gazed across the quiet backyard, watching the birch trees drooping in the wind. It was past ten now; the sun had been down for hours and filmy clouds were beginning to drift across the dark skies, covering the stars.

"I'm close," the radio crackled, startling Joyce so badly she nearly dropped it. "I can see the house."

"Okay, just hurry," Joyce said. "I don't want you to freeze to death out here." She paused, then held down the button again. "Mike?"

"Yeah?" he replied almost instantly, and Joyce was painfully grateful for the energy in his voice.

"How's Eleven? Is she all right?"

"She's kind of going in and out," Mike said. "She's starting to get a little warmer though, I think."

The radio cracked and popped in Joyce's hands. "Mike, you've gotta keep her awake," Hopper said. "It's dangerous for her to fall asleep. Keep her conscious."

"Um, okay. I'll try, it's just..."

"Talk to her," Hopper said, his voice gentling a little bit. "Ask her questions. Try to get her talk to you."

Joyce pushed the button to talk again, her head bending over the mouthpiece. "Eleven, honey?" she said.

The radio went silent for a moment, then crackled again. "Joyce?" a faint voice rasped.

Joyce's heart seized. She gripped the radio tighter. "Honey, we need you to stay awake, okay?" she said. "I know you're tired, but you have to stay awake and talk to Mike. Can you do that for me?"

There was a pause. "She nodded," Mike informed her.

"Okay," Joyce said. "Hopper's on his way to get you and bring you home. Just be brave. All right?"

Another long pause. "All right," Eleven echoed.

Joyce exhaled slowly, leaning her elbows on the porch railing and looking out over the yard, the radio heavy in her hands. She paused

when she saw a slim figure striding through the snow-strewn grass. "Nancy?" she called.

Nancy jogged the last few feet across the yard and up the steps. "How close is Hopper?" she asked.

"Pretty close, I think," Joyce said. "Come inside and warm up."

She ushered the girl into the house, the tension in her shoulders instantly relaxing as the heat surrounded her. "Mom!" Will said, running down the hall. "Give me the supercomm, I can give Jim directions now."

"Wait, wait, are you okay?" Joyce asked. She caught him by the shoulders. "You're warm enough now? No coughing or anything?"

"I'm fine," he protested. "I have to help."

Joyce handed him the radio and he zipped off to sit by the window. She sighed and looked at Nancy. "You're all right?" she asked.

"Fine," she said. The girl's face was a mottled white and pink from the cold, but she had already briskly peeled off her winter coat and mittens. "Is there a place where I can hang these up?"

"Sure, hall closet," Joyce said. She caught Nancy gingerly by the elbow, her fingers barely touching her sleeve. "You saw Eleven?" Nancy nodded. "How is she?"

"She was so cold," Nancy confessed. "She was like ice."

"Is she hurt at all?"

"I'm not sure. She had blood on her face though."

Joyce squeezed her elbow gently. "Hopefully Hopp will be back with her soon," she said. Nancy nodded.

"Mom?" Jonathan called from the kitchen. "I made hot chocolate. Want some?"

"Sure, honey," Joyce said.

Jonathan emerged with a mug in each hand. "Do you...oh," he said. "Nancy. You're back. Good."

"Mm-hm," she said.

The two teenagers stared at each other. Joyce looked from one to the other, then stepped forward and took a mug from Jonathan's hand. "Save some for Mike and Eleven," she said. "I'll make coffee for Hopp."

"No, no, I'll make coffee," Jonathan said hastily. "We don't need a repeat of last time."

"I can help," Nancy said.

"No, I, um..."

Joyce left the teenagers to stammer at each other and walked over to Will. "Here," she said, setting the mug down beside him.

He didn't look up. He was watching intently out the window, staring at the light snow falling. He was lost in thought, so Joyce settled for sitting down beside him and placing her hand on his back.

All they could do was wait.

"So take a right?"

"No, take a left."

Hopper held the radio against his shoulder, listening closely to Will's voice. He swung the flashlight around, getting his bearings. For god's sake, he used to know these woods like the back of his hand when he was Will's age and now he had no idea where he was.

"How much farther, kid?" he asked.

"Not too far. You should be pretty close, actually."

Hopper drummed his fingers against the side of the radio and squinted through the snow, trying to ignore the impatient thoughts drilling into his head. This was his fault. This was all his fucking

fault.

He sold her out to save Will Byers. And sure, he succeeded. But he knew she was in the upside down, and he left her there. He told himself there was time. That he could leave her food to alleviate his guilt and eventually he'd find her. And he thought he'd done such a good thing by breaking into the abandoned lab and stealing all the records he could find. But it hadn't done her any good.

It was the second time a little girl's blood had been left on his hands.

"Jim? Do you see a really big tree stump nearby? It should be close, and when you see it if you just go straight-"

He picked up his pace. "I see it," he said as he broke into the clearing. The little ramshackle fort came into view, alone and untouched in the dark.

He could hear the Wheeler kid's voice clearly. "So what's your favorite color?" A pause as he waited for an answer that Hopper couldn't hear. "Yeah, I figured. I'm not even going to guess what your favorite food is, it's Eggos. Uh...what about a favorite animal? Do you have a favorite animal?"

Hopper drew back the curtain covering the doorway. "Hey, kids," he said. "We gotta go."

Mike scrambled up immediately, his winter coat sliding around his shoulders. "She's still awake!" he said, and Hopper forced himself to look at the limp little form lying beside him in the heap of blankets.

He knelt down, swallowing down unwanted adrenaline. "Hey, Eleven," he said. "How're you doing?"

She blinked slowly, her eyes too large in her pale dirty face. "Bad," she whispered.

Adrenaline buzzed up and down his spine. "I know, I know," he said. "I'm gonna check you out real quick, okay?"

She nodded. He tucked his flashlight between his jaw and his shoulder and gently felt along her thin arms and legs. "Nothing's

broken," he said. "Anything hurt?"

She shook her head. He couldn't tell if she was covered with bruises or dirt. Probably both. "Mike got you warmed up a little though," he commented. "Do you feel cold?" She nodded. "That's good. You don't completely have hypothermia."

"Hypothermia?" Mike said, alarmed. "People die from that."

"She'll be fine," Hopper said. "Jesus, kid. Don't scare her." He took her hands in his and carefully bent her fingers. She winced. "Joints are pretty stiff, huh?"

She nodded, and this time the exertion made her cough, a wet hacking noise. Mike whipped his head around to look at Hopper in horror. Hopper desperately wished to be anywhere but here, the sole grownup in charge of this whole situation. He handed Mike the flashlight and slid one hand under Eleven's narrow back, the other under her neck. Carefully he lifted her into a sitting position and held her steady until the coughing fit subsided.

"Let's get you home, okay?" Hopper said. He picked up the discarded blanket- it was dusty and covered with leaves, but it was something- and wrapped it around her tightly. "Hold onto me. I'm gonna pick you up."

He slid an arm under her knees and started to stand; she yelped, her fingers scrabbling in panic to grip onto his shoulder. "You're okay, princess, you're okay," he soothed, and he immediately hated himself. That was Sarah's nickname. No one else's.

But Eleven calmed quickly, dropping her cheek against his shoulder, and he gritted his teeth and stood up, adjusting her against his chest. "Mike, I need you to walk in front," he said. "Shine the flashlight on the path. You know how to get back to the house?"

"Yes, sir," Mike said, jumping up with the flashlight in hand. He held the curtain back so Hopper could step through.

It was snowing harder, still mixed with sleet. Hopper adjusted his grip on Eleven and tilted her closer to shield her. He didn't have

extensive medical training- just enough to help at the scene of a situation- but he knew enough that she needed to get inside soon. Mike staying with her, lying beside her in the fort, was probably the only thing that had kept her from sinking too deeply into hypothermia.

"Mike, can you get on the radio?" Hopper said. "Tell Joyce we're on our way back. Tell her Eleven is gonna need to get warmed up as soon as we get there."

He looked down at the little girl as Mike turned the supercomm on. Her eyes were glazed over and staring blankly at the night sky. Shock was probably going to set in soon.

He walked carefully over the uneven ground, sidestepping errant branches as he followed the erratic beam of Mike's flashlight. Eleven was silent in his arms, her eyes struggling to stay open. She was so still, unnervingly still.

He'd responded to plenty of 911 calls in his career, both in Hawkins and in his before-life in Indianapolis. Domestic disturbances, car wrecks, freak accidents. He'd seen all sorts of reactions from kids. But he'd never seen a kid react like Eleven before. Most kids screamed. Cried for their mothers. Clung to him in terror and sobbed, getting tears and snot all over his uniform until he could hand them off to a parent or another officer. He had never had a child stay perfectly still like a little statue, not screaming or crying or fighting.

Probably because she had never known a mother to cry for. Probably because she learned that fighting and screaming got her punished.

Hopper lifted her a little closer so her cheek could rest on his shoulder. Her breath was faint against the side of his neck. "You'll be okay, Eleven," he said, low enough that Mike couldn't hear. "You're safe."

She didn't answer, but her hand tightened on the lapel of his jacket.

Nancy sat on the edge of the couch in the Byers' living room, her empty cocoa mug cupped primly in her hands, and she tried not to stare. She hadn't exactly been to Jonathan's house before- well, she

had, but there had been demon monsters and dead girls in swimming pools and government officials to worry about. Now she was sitting on the couch, keenly aware that her father referred to the Byers family politely as "blue collar" and Tommy and Carol called Jonathan "white trash."

She had never really quite noticed anything unusual about her own childhood. She'd always lived in the house on Maple Street, with her own bedroom and a basement to play in and a nice backyard. And Barb lived just a few streets away, with her own bedroom and basement and yard too. Her father worked late, but that was fine, because her mother was always home to cook and clean and help her with her homework. And that was normal. She had always kind of assumed that everyone grew up like that, that all of her little elementary schoolmates also had a nice house and a dad who worked and a mom who stayed home.

She hadn't noticed any differences between herself and Jonathan until the fourth grade. They'd always been in the same classes her and Jonathan and Barb, and Tommy and Carol; Steve didn't show up until her eighth grade year. But that was the year they did their unit on Indiana history, and they were supposed to dress up as famous people from Indiana and do presentations, and then the moms had made a potluck.

(She'd gone as Twyla Tharp, the dancer, in her ballet recital costume from the year before. Barb went as Amelia Earhart, only because that's what her older sister had been for the project three years earlier and her mother didn't want to sew another costume).

Her mother was there, of course, because her mother always came to whatever class events she had. And Jonathan's mother was there, a thin birdlike woman with large dark eyes and an anxious, eager to please smile. Her dress wasn't as nice as the other moms, and she kind of kept to herself, and she wore too much makeup. Even Nancy, at the age of eight, could tell when a grown up lady was wearing too much makeup. Her mother said it was trashy.

But it was hot in the gym that day, with the heat turned up against the winter winds outside and the thirty fourth graders running around, and the thick makeup started to slide, and underneath there

was a startling purple bruise on Mrs. Byers' cheekbone. Someone asked about it and she'd put her hand to her face, laughing self-consciously, and stammered out something about falling on the ice.

Shortly after that she heard from Barb (who overheard her mom talking on the phone to Carol's mom who heard it from God knows where) that Jonathan's dad left and his parents were getting a divorce. And not a glamorous divorce like Carol's, whose dad and new stepmother and new half sister lived in Cincinnati and so she had two bedrooms and two birthdays and two Christmases, but an altogether different kind of divorce. Mrs. Byers never showed up to class events after that, and she saw her at the drugstore sometimes, stocking shelves or ringing people up at the register. That was a shock. Moms weren't supposed to work. They were supposed to stay home and make dinner and clean the house and sew missing buttons back on and help you with your math flashcards. And she supposed that was why Jonathan showed up to school without a lunch, or with his hair sticking up uncombed, or without the textbooks everyone was supposed to buy on the first day of school.

Now, though, Nancy understood. It made sense. The bruise, Jonathan's behavior, the lack of photos of Mr. Byers in the living room.

She looked around surreptitiously, tapping the pads of her fingers on the mug. It was actually kind of a nice room, now that the sloppily painted alphabet and the myriad of Christmas lights and the massive hole in the wall had been replaced. The furniture was mismatched and well-worn but comfortable, and there was a cozy amount of clutter- Jonathan's library books, Will's sketches and colored pencils, Joyce's scarves and sweaters. Nothing like her own home, where her mother insisted on everything being put away just so and every surface clean enough to eat on.

Will sat by the window, holding the radio close to his ear and occasionally relaying information. Jonathan and Joyce were in the kitchen, arguing.

"Mom, just put her in my room."

"But that's not fair, she can-"

"Will and I have shared a room before, it'll be fine. I'll just get some of my important stuff out and change the sheets on my bed."

Nancy looked down at her socks. She'd left the house so quickly they didn't even match; she had one purple sock and one aqua. Dammit.

She looked back up, exhaling slowly. She was not accustomed to feeling out of place and useless and yet, here she was.

Suddenly Will leaped up, tossing the radio aside. Nancy jumped in surprise. "Mom, they're here!" he shouted. She stood up and backed away as Jonathan opened the door and Hopper strode in, Eleven cradled close to his chest and Mike at his heels.

"Is she okay? Is she conscious?"

"What took you so long?"

"Did anyone see you?"

"Okay, everybody stop shouting, just shut up," Hopper said, irritated, as he set Eleven down carefully on the couch. He sat down beside her, pulled his gloves off, and touched the back of his hand to her cheeks. "Shit. Joyce, do you have a thermometer? We need to see how bad her temperature's dropped."

"I'll get it," Jonathan said.

Nancy hung back, watching. In the warm light of the living room Eleven's skin looked gray and blue. Her thin hands trembled; Hopper took them carefully in his.

Joyce slipped past Hopper. "Just hold this in your mouth for me," she said, holding out the thermometer. Eleven obeyed, sitting up stiffly. Joyce touched her cheek. "Oh, honey. I'm so glad we have you back."

Mike hovered anxiously. "Is she okay?" he asked, leaning in a little too close.

Nancy took him by the arm and tugged him back. "The grownups will take care of her, just give her some space," she said, keeping her voice quiet. "Go get warmed up. Or Mom will kill me."

"But I-"

She shot him a look, and he stomped away, scowling. Hopper took the thermometer from Eleven's pale lips. "She's down to 95.2," he said. "Better than I thought."

"Should we take her to a hospital?" Joyce worried.

"And tell them what?" Hopper retorted. "We've got a sick kid with no birth certificate, no medical records, and a tattoo on her arm? Yeah, that'll go over real well." Joyce crossed her arms and glared at him. "Get her a clean blanket and get her to drink something warm. When her body temperature's high enough and it won't shock her system, give her a bath and put her to bed. We'll just have to play it by ear from there."

He got up and stalked out of the room. "Fine," Joyce sighed. She reached for one of the folded blankets that had been set out earlier and shook it out. "Honey, can you sit up a little?"

Eleven struggled to push herself up, her thin arms trembling. Joyce quickly tugged away the dirty blanket from the fort and wrapped the clean one around her. "Better?" she asked. Eleven nodded.

Jonathan walked over to them, holding a mug with a lid carefully. "It's tea," he said, holding it out. Eleven blinked. "With honey."

He held it out in front of Eleven, who stared at it blankly. Joyce took her hands and cupped them around the mug. "Drink slowly," she said. Eleven took a cautious sip, her hands shaking. Joyce adjusted the blanket around her shoulders, then traced her fingertips along Eleven's hairline. "Will, can you get me a warm wet washcloth? Not too hot."

Nancy stayed back, tangling her fingers together. "Is there anything I can do?" she asked.

"No, it's okay," Joyce said absently, brushing her thumb along Eleven's cheekbone. Will ran up and handed her the washcloth. "Hold still, sweetie."

Joyce dabbed the warm wet cloth against Eleven's nose, wiping away

the worst of the blood. "You're not hurt, right? It's just from your powers?" she asked.

"Uh-huh," Eleven rasped.

Joyce worked carefully over Eleven's pale face, cleaning away dried mud and crusted blood, occasionally pausing to turn the washcloth to a clean spot. Eleven sat still except for the shivering of her shoulders, the mug clutched tight in her trembling fingers.

Nancy bit her lip. "Mrs. Byers, is it okay if I use your phone?" she asked. "I just want to check in with my mom."

"Sure, of course, honey."

She walked over to the phone and dialed the familiar number, crossing her free arm over her chest and turning her back towards the living room. Her mother answered on the second ring.

"Mom?"

"Nancy, oh my god," Karen sighed. "What's going on?"

"Everything's fine," Nancy said, shifting her weight. "Mike's fine too. We're still at the Byers'."

"Will you be home soon? It's starting to storm pretty hard and I don't want you driving late at night if the roads are iced over."

"Um, yeah, we'll probably leave soon," Nancy said, even though she had no idea if she was telling the truth or not.

Her mother paused. "Did...did you find her?" Karen asked tentatively. "The little girl?"

Nancy looked back over her shoulder. Joyce was sitting beside Eleven now, her arm around her shoulders, encouraging her to keep drinking the tea, and Will was perched on the arm of the couch watching them anxiously. Jonathan sat across from them on the edge of his chair, elbows on his knees and hands clasped. "Yeah, we found her," Nancy said quietly. "Mike did, actually."

"Oh my god," Karen said, her voice tilting up in surprise. "Is...is she all right?"

"I don't know for sure," Nancy confessed. "She's really cold. She was out there for a long time." She turned around again and fixed her eyes on the cluttered kitchen counter instead, tangling the phone cord around her fingers. "I think we'll probably stay long enough to make sure she's all right. But Mike's fine, and I'll drive safe whenever we leave."

"I suppose," Karen said reluctantly. "Just...keep me updated, okay?"

"I will," Nancy said. "Bye, Mom."

She hung the phone up with a quiet click and slipped back into the living room just as Hopper strode down the hall. He had taken off his hat and changed into a different shirt, and it was a little unsettling to see him as a normal man instead of the chief of police. "How's she holding up?" he asked.

"Better, I think?" Joyce said.

Hopper picked up the thermometer from the end table. "If her temperature's up you can give her a bath," he said. He eyed Eleven critically. "You look better with your face cleaned up, kid."

It wasn't that much of an improvement in Nancy's opinion. The worst of the caked-on dirt and dried slime was gone, along with most of the black blood, but her cheeks were hollow and a deep purple bruise darkened her temple.

Mike darted into the room. "Is she okay?" he demanded.

"Jesus, are you always this loud?" Hopper said without looking up. "Calm the fuck down."

"But-"

"Sit."

Mike sank down on the opposite edge of the couch from Eleven. She looked up at him, eyes wide, and he smiled. Her shoulders relaxed

and she exhaled slowly.

Hopper drew the thermometer from her mouth. "Up to 96," he said. "Better." He shook out the thermometer and set it aside. "Get her cleaned up and let her sleep. Where're you putting her?"

"My room," Jonathan said.

Hopper nodded. "We can take care of that; Joyce, you take care of her," he said. "Nancy, you help Joyce."

Nancy unfolded her arms. "Oh, yeah, of course," she said.

Joyce stood up, tucking her hair behind her ears, and held out her hands to Eleven. "Sweetie, can you stand up?" she asked.

Eleven didn't nod but she took Joyce's hands and tried to pull herself up. Her feet in her beat up sneakers touched the floor and she cried out, flinging herself back and curling into herself.

"Elle?" Mike said, inching towards her.

Hopper scooped her up without a word, leaving the blanket behind, and carried her down the hall. Joyce followed; Nancy paused and looked at her brother. "Just do whatever Chief Hopper tells you," she said. Mike, too startled to reply, just nodded.

Hopper set Eleven down on the edge of the bathtub; without the blanket she was shivering furiously now, her arms dangling at her sides. "You two can handle this?" he said.

"I've raised two kids, Hopp, it'll be fine," Joyce said. "Go on." She made a shooing motion at him and he left, closing the bathroom door behind him. Joyce knelt down, bracing the small of Eleven's back. "We're going to help you get cleaned up, sweetheart. Is that okay?" Eleven nodded, her teeth starting to chatter. "Nancy, can you help hold her up? I'm going to get her shoes off."

Nancy sat down beside her and carefully put her arm around the girl. She could feel Eleven's shoulderblades jutting out, pressing into her forearm. Joyce plucked at the laces of Eleven's right sneaker and pried it off.

Eleven folded forward, pressing her hands over her face, and cried out, the sound muffled by her palms. "I'm sorry, I'm so sorry, honey," Joyce apologized. "Oh my god. Honey, I'm sorry." She tossed the shoe aside, the sock with it. "God, that's a lot of blood." Eleven was still crumpled forward, stifling her whimpers. Nancy rubbed her back gently. Joyce took off her other shoe quickly. "We're done. We're done, baby." She rocked back on her heels. "Damn. How was she able to walk out there?"

Nancy swallowed hard around the lump in her throat. Joyce smoothed her hand over Eleven's hair. "Sit up for me, okay?" she said.

Eleven struggled to obey, pushing herself upright, and Nancy kept her hand on her back to keep her from falling. Joyce moved her stiff arms carefully, peeling the filthy plaid flannel shirt off of her and dropping it in a pile on the floor. She looked at the dress underneath, the fabric black with dirt and mold and blood. "It'll be easier if we just cut it off her," she said. "Nancy, there's a pair of scissors on the kitchen counter, can you-"

"No," Eleven said, shaking her head. "No, no."

"Honey, there's no way we can clean it," Joyce explained. "We might as well-"

"No!" Eleven said desperately. She looked wildly at Nancy, then back at Joyce. "No, please."

"What's wrong?" Joyce asked. "Why are you upset?"

Eleven's gaze darted back and forth, her mouth trembling. Nancy shifted her weight. "Eleven, are you...are you worried that I'm going to be mad?" she ventured. "Because it's my dress?"

Eleven nodded, pressing her lips together tightly.

"I'm not mad," Nancy said. "I'm not mad at all. I haven't worn that dress since I was ten. It's okay."

Eleven stared down at the skirt spread over her knees, at the splotched stains and bloody rips. "Pretty," she whispered sadly, her voice cracking.

"We'll get you other dresses," Joyce said. She stroked Eleven's hair. "Pretty dresses. I promise."

Eleven shivered, her shoulders slumped in defeat. "Promise?" she echoed. Joyce smiled at her warmly, and Eleven pushed herself up.

"Kitchen counter?" Nancy asked, and Joyce nodded as she slid her arm around Eleven's back.

It was just a dress. A stupid dress, one that she hadn't even liked all the much. Her mother had gotten it for her for Easter one year and she'd whined and fussed because she'd wanted a different dress, a green one she'd seen in the window of JC Penney. She'd worn it once, just for church that Sunday, and sulked the whole time, and then put it back in the closet and never touched it again. And here was Eleven almost in tears because she'd never worn anything so beautiful before.

Nancy picked up the scissors from the counter and walked back to the bathroom closing the door behind her. Joyce had turned on the water in the bathtub but she was still resting her hand on Eleven's knee. Nancy held out the scissors, handles first.

"Just hold her steady," Joyce said.

Nancy braced her as Joyce slowly snipped at the seams of the dress. Eleven's lower lip wobbled as the fabric fell away but she didn't make a sound. The pink dress was left as a small sad heap of dirty rags on the floor, and once Joyce pulled the last piece away she helped Eleven into the bathtub, the surface of the water rippling and sloshing quietly until she was settled.

Nancy sat on the edge of the tub as Joyce knelt on the floor and washed the grime from Eleven's cold skin and matted hair, following whatever instructions she was given. It was a different experience than all the times her mother had sent her to give Holly a bath before bed. Holly was always noisy, splashing around, shrieking when her hair had to be rinsed and begging her to play mermaids with her barbies. This was a slow process, no sudden movements, with Joyce occasionally pausing to talk to Eleven quietly when the girl started shaking too much. The small white tiled bathroom smelled like peach

shampoo and Dove soap- reassuring, homey smells, but Eleven was silent, shivering despite the warmth of the water. Water sluiced the dirt from her skin, turning the water dark gray, but now her bruises and scrapes were obvious- her knees and palms were badly skinned, her arms and legs were scratched, and deep bruises marked her in dark blue and purple.

Joyce took Eleven's left wrist in her hand and turned her arm gently to clean the dirt and blood from her palm. Her tattoo was stark in contrast to her pale, waxy skin. Nancy tried not to stare. She hadn't seen it in person yet, and it didn't seem real.

"We'll get you dressed and get you patched up, and then you can sleep, okay?" Joyce said as she covered Eleven's eyes with her cupped hand and rinsed the last of the conditioner from her short hair. "I've probably got something you can wear to sleep in-"

"I actually...I brought some of my own things," Nancy offered. "My old stuff. It's been in the basement, but they ought to fit. I can go get them."

"That's great," Joyce said, relief in her voice. "That's so great. Thanks." She brushed Eleven's wet hair back from her forehead. "I'll take care of her if you can go get it."

Nancy ducked out of the warm bathroom and picked up her backpack, rummaging around through the haphazard collection of clothing. Her fingertips brushed something especially soft and she pulled out a white flannel nightgown, long sleeved with a little lace collar. She picked it up, brushing out the wrinkles.

Joyce had Eleven sitting on the edge of the bathtub, wrapped in a towel, and was rubbing her arms briskly. "Here," Nancy said, holding out the nightgown. "It's pretty, right?"

Eleven reached out tentatively, brushing her fingertips against the flannel. "Pretty," she repeated softly. She looked up at Nancy and smiled just a little bit.

"Let's get you dressed, honey," Joyce said. She took the towel away, draping it over the side of the tub, and Nancy handed her the

nightgown. Eleven was painfully thin, her collarbones jutting through her skin and the spaces between her ribs hollow.

Joyce helped her dress, pulling the hem of the long nightgown down and fastening the single button at the back of her neck. Eleven wavered, struggling to keep her eyes open. "Just a little longer, baby," Joyce soothed. "Do you want me to carry you?"

Eleven shook her head and pushed herself up. Nancy caught her by the elbow, supporting her arm. Joyce came along her other side and wrapped her arm around Eleven's waist. "Thank you so much for your help, Nancy," she said quietly.

Nancy shrugged uncomfortably. "Sure," she said. She still didn't feel like she'd been all that useful.

Joyce nudged the bathroom door open and helped Eleven walk shakily down the hall; the girl leaned heavily on her arm, each step unsteady and wobbly. Nancy trailed behind her down the hall, following the sounds of Will and Mike chattering and Jonathan trying in vain to quiet them.

She hadn't been in Jonathan's bedroom before. It was small but neatly organized, the walls covered with posters. A big record and cassette player stood in a place of honor beside the window. Jonathan was standing beside the bed, his arms folded across his chest, and Nancy had the sudden image of him sleeping there and had to quickly look somewhere else in an attempt to push the thought away.

"Elle, you look so much better," Mike said, his grin wide with relief. "She's going to be okay, right?"

Hopper ignored him. "Joyce, you've got a first aid kit, right?" he said. "Look at that cut on her leg."

"Yeah, it's in my bathroom, under the sink," Joyce said.

"I'll grab it," Jonathan offered, brushing past Nancy.

Joyce set Eleven down on the bed and moved her legs so she could lie down against the pillows. "Got out an electric blanket and a

humidifier," Hopper said. "That should help."

Eleven's eyes were already closed. Joyce stroked her hair, the drying ends curling around her fingertips. "What do we from here?" she asked.

"Patch her up, let her sleep," Hopper shrugged. "Keep an eye on her. She's got a cough already and that could turn nasty fast." He looked at the boys. "She'll need her space. No crowding her, no getting her worked up."

Will nodded obediently. "Mike, we'd better go home," Nancy said.

"Can't I stay?" Mike protested. "Mom won't mind if I spend the night. What if she wakes up and freaks out?"

"Mom wants us home," Nancy said. "I don't think they need us anymore, so say goodnight and let's go, okay?"

"But-"

"Just let her sleep. You can come back and see her tomorrow," Joyce said.

Mike sighed, his whole body drooping in defeat. "Fine," he said. "I can say goodnight, right?"

"Make it quick," Hopper said.

Mike squeezed Eleven's hand and she opened her eyes to look at him. She smiled when she saw him, really smiled, her eyes lighting up for the first time since they brought her into the house. "Mike," she sighed.

He sat on the edge of the bed and leaned over her. "I have to go home," he said. "But I'll be back tomorrow. They're all going to take care of you, so you'll be okay."

It was a very sweet picture, him bending over her like a shield, her in her white nightgown and her short hair dark against the pillow. "Promise?" she asked.

"Promise," he said firmly. He swiftly leaned in and kissed her on the cheek, then bolted upright, glancing around the other people in the room as if he just realized they were still there.

"All right, all right, shoo," Hopper said. "Give the kid room to breathe."

"Drive safe," Joyce said.

"I will," Nancy said, steering Mike out of the room. "Goodnight. Thanks." She waited until they were back in the living room and safely out of earshot. "Hm, I thought you didn't like Eleven."

"What? No. Of course not," Mike stammered, hastily pulling his shoes on.

Nancy hid a smirk as she reached for her boots, but she paused. Eleven was coughing hard, loud enough for the sound to carry down the hall, and she could hear Joyce's voice, soft and muffled, trying to comfort her. Mike paused, his shoe only partially tied.

"Nancy?" he said. "She'll be okay, right? We've got her back so she'll fine."

He was looking up at her expectantly, waiting for an answer. "Sure," she said. "I'm sure she'll be all right."

But in her mind's eye she could see the painfully sharp lines of Eleven's ribs, the white waxy color of her skin and the way her arms and legs trembled when she tried to stand, and like so many other things, Nancy forced the thought away and smiled instead.

Author's Notes:

LISTEN IF JUST ONE THING CAN GO RIGHT FOR THIS CHILD THAT WOULD BE GREAT.

But yeah. They have her back, they just need to keep her in one piece.

Also dad!Hopper getting frustrated at Mike is my new favorite thing.

Feel free to leave any thoughts about this chapter or anything you'd like to see in future chapters! I want to know what you think!

5. In a Week

Disclaimer: Stranger Things belongs to the Duffer Brothers and Netflix, not me.

You open your eyes and you don't know where you are.

You look at the dark ceiling, your heart thudding an erratic rhythm in your chest. You have no idea where you are. The room is small and shadowed; the door is closed. The single window is shielded with a thin curtain and moonlight filters softly through it.

A window. So not the closet at the lab, then.

But where are you then? Not the woods. Not the little fort. Not the upside down.

You're covered in blankets that suddenly seem too thick, too suffocating, and you push them off. Your arms shake, and your hands are stiff. You look down at your palms and see them swathed in a thin layer of white gauze. You don't know why.

You sit up and your head swims. The room tilts and dips around you and you press your hands to your temples, whining through your teeth. It makes your throat hurt, your chest ache, and a cough seizes the back of your throat.

You double over, covering your mouth with your hands, and the door opens. "Eleven?" a gentle voice says. "Are you all right?"

She switches on the lamp beside your bed. It takes a second, but you recognize the woman. Will and Jonathan's mother. Joyce. Her dark eyes are soft and concerned. You stare at her, unable to speak, and she sits beside you. "It's okay," she soothes, bracing your shoulders. "Take a deep breath."

You try to obey, but you don't know why she's there. You don't know how you got there. You stare down at the rumpled blankets covering your legs. Slowly your cough subsides, leaving your eyes watering

and your throat burning. She smoothes your short hair.

"She okay?"

You look up and another stranger is standing in the doorway. But you recognize him faster. This is the police chief, the one who left you food when you were lost in the upside down. You can't remember his name, but you know his face.

"She was coughing," Joyce says, her hand still on your hair. "Hopper, are you sure we can't take her to a hospital?"

"Not without an alibi," he says grimly. He stands beside you and cups his callused hand over your forehead. "She's a little warm though."

They talk over your head in quiet voices. You curl your fingers, trying in vain to remember how you got here. Your skin is clean of dirt and grime and blood, your cuts and bruises have been bandaged, and you're wearing a soft white nightgown. What happened in the middle?

You need to speak, but it takes effort. "What..." you finally force out, the words sticking like a lump in your throat. They stop talking and look at you. "What happened?"

They exchange a look over your head. "You don't know?" Joyce asks. You shake your head. "What's the last thing you remember?"

You think hard. "The woods," you finally say. "Hiding."

Hopper kneels down beside you so he can look you in the eye. "Mike found you," he says, and your heart squeezes. "He found you in the fort and kept you warm until I got you. I brought you home."

"Home?" you echo.

"My house," Joyce clarifies. "This is Jonathan's room. My oldest son. Do you remember him?"

You pause, then nod. "Safe?" you venture.

"Yes, baby, you're safe," Joyce reassures you, hugging you around

your shoulders. "Nothing's going to hurt you, okay?"

She hugs you to her side and you huddle beside her. She's so warm and soft and smells like soap and cigarette smoke, and her arm is tight around your shoulders. But Hopper is still looking at you, his eyes grave, and you look at him and you know. You might not be safe after all.

"You'd better give her something for that cough," he says, breaking his gaze and standing up. "You got anything that might help?"

"There's some cough syrup in the medicine cabinet," Joyce says. "Top shelf."

Hopper leaves, and you're left alone with Joyce. You look down at your hands, resting on the faded comforter. "You've been through a lot," she says gently. "We're going to take care of you, all right? We're going to keep you safe this time."

You nod, tears burning behind your eyelids. No one has ever spoken to you like this before. No one has ever promised to protect you.

Joyce covers your hands with hers and touches your cheek. "Don't worry," she says. "No one's going to hurt you anymore. I promise." She smooths her thumb along your cheekbone and pauses when she realizes a tear is dripping down the side of your nose.

"Oh, don't cry," she says, her voice catching, and you fold into yourself, drawing your knees to your chest, covering your face with your hands. She wraps her arms around you and leans you against her chest, resting her chin on the top of your head, and you cry. You cry and cry and cry, hiding your face, trying in vain to smother the sounds of your sobbing, but Joyce doesn't scold you, doesn't force you to stop, doesn't heft you up to shove you in the closet. She stays silent, her arms secure around you, holding you tight.

You start to calm down of your own accord, your shoulders hitching, and you lean away, still hiding your eyes. Joyce picks up a tissue from the box on the table beside you and tilts your chin up to dab at your wet face.

By the time Hopper comes back you're calm again, although your eyes are still unpleasantly hot and itchy. He hands you two cups, one filled with purple syrup, the other with water. "Take your medicine," he says, nodding towards the purple one. "Then drink the water. All of it."

You obey. The syrup is thick and bites at your throat, strong and sickeningly sweet. You sip the water to clear the taste away. "We'd better keep an eye on her temperature," Hopper says to Joyce, and she nods. You hold out the two empty cups for Hopper's approval and he takes them. "Go back to sleep, kid."

Joyce holds the covers up so you can lie down, and she drapes them over you and tucks you in. You're suddenly tired, exhausted down to your bones, but as she reaches to turn off the light your breath catches in your throat. You don't want to sleep.

Joyce hesitates. "Do you want me to stay with you until you fall asleep?" she asked tentatively.

You nod, just the slightest bit. She turns off the lamp and you flinch, but the bed shifts beside you as she lies down and you relax. You move carefully until you're comfortable, lying on your stomach with your arms tucked up to your chest, making yourself small. Joyce places her hand on your back. It's a slight pressure but it's warm and firm and reassuring, and before long you drift off into a thick, heavy sleep.

Will woke up with a start at the sound of his supercomm crackling at his ear. "Will? Come in!"

He looked down at his brother sleeping on the floor, a cocoon of blankets and sleeping bag with only the top of his head visible, then grabbed the supercomm, jumped out of bed, and slipped out of his bedroom and down the hall. "Holy shit, Mike, what was that for?" he hissed. "It's-" He looked up at the clock in the hall. "Okay, it's eight in the morning. But still, you almost woke up Jonathan!"

"Sorry," Mike said. He didn't sound sorry. "Is Eleven awake yet? Can I come over? I already told Lucas and Dustin that she's back and they want to see her too."

"I don't know, I just woke up," Will said. "Hold on. I'll check."

He set the radio down and walked as silently as he could to Jonathan's room. The whole house was quiet and still; most likely everyone was still asleep. Even the dog was quiet.

The door to Jonathan's room was left open. He cracked it a little wider and peeked inside. Eleven was asleep, curled up in a small ball in Jonathan's bed, covered in several layers of thick blankets and quilts. His mother was lying beside her, her hand resting on Eleven's back.

Will backed out of the room and slipped back down the hall. "She's still asleep," he said, his voice too loud in the hushed house.

"Oh," Mike said, disappointed. "Can you call me as soon as she wakes up?"

"As long as my mom says it's okay for you to come over," Will said.

"Okay. 10-4."

The radio fell silent. Will fiddled with the dials. He felt a little unsettled, like a stranger in his own house. Everything had felt so odd since he'd come back from the upside down- his house was strange, the chief was always over, his mother was acting differently.

He was acting differently.

And now there was a girl asleep in his house, a girl who saved him and in turn helped save, but he didn't know anything about her. He hadn't even met her outside of his dreams, not really.

"What are you thinking about, honey?"

He looked up to see his mother and he scrambled to his feet. "Mom, did I wake you?" he asked.

Joyce shook her head, smiling at him. "No, I've been awake for a while," she said. She stroked a strand of hair out of his eyes. "You've got your thinking face on. What's wrong?"

"Nothing," he said. Impulsively he stepped forward and hugged her. She hugged him back, squeezing him tight.

She kissed the top of his head. "Everybody's still asleep," she said. "Your brother will probably wake up soon, but we'd better let Eleven sleep as long as possible. How about we make breakfast, hm?"

"Okay," he said warily. He'd been subjected to plenty of his mother's attempts at meals fancier than cereal and pop tarts in his childhood. This could end badly. "Mom, Mike wants to know if he can come over. And bring Lucas and Dustin."

"Only if Eleven's awake," Joyce said. "She needs to rest, okay? But as soon as she's awake."

Eleven didn't wake up until nearly afternoon.

Mike kept checking in, asking eagerly if he could come over, and Will had to keep reminding him to wait until he was half tempted to turn the supercomm off completely. It wasn't until past eleven o'clock that Eleven slowly limped into the living room, her arms wrapped around her skinny frame, and sank down on the couch. Will didn't even notice her at first; he was absorbed in his drawing.

Jonathan saw her first, the television remote sliding from his hand. "Eleven, hey," he said. She sat on the very edge of the couch, her back ramrod straight and her hands knotted on her lap. Jonathan eased a little closer to her. "Does Mom know you're up?"

Eleven took a small shuddering breath, her fingers unfolding and folding. "I'll get Mom," Jonathan said. "Will...watch her."

He got up. Will hesitated. Eleven was very still, her white nightgown spread around her. The bruise under her eye was a deep mottled purple and her hands and feet were wrapped in gauze.

It was strange seeing her out of the upside down and in his living room. Almost like she didn't belong, but also like she had always belonged there. He wanted to say something to her, but he didn't know what to say. How do you introduce yourself to someone who saved your life, who talked to you in a dream world, but you've never

seen them in reality?

Joyce walked into the room. "What are you doing out of bed?" she asked. Eleven looked up at her, stricken. "I didn't even know you were awake. Are you hungry?"

Eleven said nothing. She stared up at Joyce, waiting. Will didn't know what she was waiting for.

The supercomm abruptly crackled in Will's hand, breaking the silence. "Will? Checking in. Any updates?"

Will rolled his eyes. "She just woke up," he said. "Like five seconds ago."

"Can we come over now? Can you ask your mom? Is it okay?" Mike asked eagerly.

Will looked at his mother. "I'm not sure-" Joyce started to say.

"Mike," Eleven whispered. She gazed at the radio in Will's hand.

Joyce smoothed her hand over Eleven's short hair- just barely long enough qualify as a pixie cut. "The boys can come over," she said. "But you guys better not get her riled up. She needs to rest and get better. So tell them they have to be on their best behavior."

Will pushed down the button on the walkie. "You can come ov-" he started to say, but the radio blared a staticky whoop of excitement from Mike.

Joyce shook her head. "Best behavior," she reminded Will.

"I know, I know. I'll tell them."

Joyce stroked Eleven's hair again. "Are you hungry, sweetie?" she asked. Eleven raised and lowered one shoulder. "You need to eat something. Is there anything you like?"

"She likes sweets," Will offered.

"She needs something healthier than that," Jonathan called from the

kitchen. "And we don't have any Eggos in the house."

Joyce sighed. "Will, just...go help your brother," she said.

Will obeyed and got up from the floor. Jonathan was digging through the refrigerator, mumbling to himself. "Mom told me to help," he said.

"Cool," Jonathan said. He pulled a carton of milk out of the fridge and frowned at it. "I don't need any help, but you can keep me company."

Will jumped up to sit on the kitchen counter. "What are you making?" he asked.

Jonathan nodded towards the stove. "Oatmeal," he said. "That's all we could get you to eat for a while when you came back."

Will looked down at the scuffed linoleum floor. It had been so hard to swallow for so long after they pulled him from the upside down. The toxic air and the...the thing that crawled into his body had torn at his esophagus, leaving his throat raw and scraped. All he could eat was oatmeal and soup and applesauce for the first two weeks, and he was pretty sure he didn't want to eat any of those things again.

"You think she's going to be okay?" Will asked.

Jonathan stirred the pot on the stove. "I don't know," he said.

Will's heart thumped in his chest. He hit his heels against the kitchen cabinet as his legs dangled over the counter. "What's going to happen to her?" he asked. "Are we going to keep her?"

"For god's sake, Will, she's not a lost puppy," Jonathan retorted.

"But what's going to happen?" Will persisted.

"If we keep her, we'll have to have a cover story," Jonathan said. "Mom can't just suddenly have three kids and pretend it's been like that the whole time. Hawkins is a small town. People will talk. And if we don't have a good enough cover story, there's always a chance that the government people will come back and take her."

"They can't do that," Will said.

"Yeah, they can." Jonathan said. "Technically she's their property."

"But she's not property. She's a person."

"So what happens if we don't keep her?" he asked.

"She'll probably go into a foster home," Jonathan said shortly. "Now will you stop asking so many questions?" He spooned a small amount of oatmeal into a bowl, poured milk over it, and stirred in a heaping spoonful of brown sugar. "Take this."

Will scowled at him, but he slid off the counter and took the bowl from him. He cupped it carefully, flexing his fingers to keep the bowl from burning him, and carried it carefully into the living room.

His mother had gotten Eleven settled on the couch. She still sat very stiffly, her bandaged hands clasped clumsily, and Joyce had the first aid kit open beside her and was working over her legs. Will winced. Her knees were badly skinned, raw and red, and there was a long jagged cut along her left shin.

He cleared his throat. "Jonathan made oatmeal," he offered. "It's kind of hot though."

Joyce made an absentminded noise of agreement as she carefully wrapped fresh gauze around Eleven's knee. Will sat down on the arm of the couch at the opposite end and watched as Joyce bandaged the silent girl up carefully. It was weird seeing his mother act like...well, someone else's mother.

Joyce trimmed off the last bit of gauze and draped a blanket over Eleven's legs, then picked up the bowl of oatmeal and placed it carefully in her hands. "Try to eat," she said. "You need to get something in your system."

Eleven stared at the bowl before cautiously picking up the spoon, her fingers clumsy, and taking a small hesitant bite. Joyce smoothed her hair. "I'll change the bandages on your hands in a little bit, okay?" she said. She got up, patting Eleven's shoulder as she left.

The living room was way too quiet. Will looked down at his knees, not wanting to stare at her but still morbidly curious. He looked away at the browning Christmas tree in the corner, its branches drooping and its lights reflecting off the cheap colored glass ornaments. Jonathan had tried to talk them out of putting up lights this year, but his mother insisted.

"What's that?"

He glanced back Eleven. Her gaze followed his, fixated on the tree. "That's, um, that's our Christmas tree," he said. "It looked better a few weeks ago."

She blinked. "Christmas?" she repeated.

"It's a holiday," he explained. "It happens once a year. We decorate trees, and, uh...you get presents. Little kids think Santa brings them, but I was six when I figured out it was just my mom and Jonathan." Her face was screwed up in confusion. He sighed. "Don't worry about it."

She took another small bite, moving the oatmeal around her mouth with a grimace. He sat up a little straighter, watching her. It was so strange to see her out of the upside down. She wasn't something he could write off as a figment of his imagination, a sad little spectre in a dirty pink dress. She was a real kid, flesh and blood, sitting in front of him with bruises under her eyes.

Eleven sighed a little and set the bowl aside. She'd barely eaten anything, but she sank back against the couch like she'd just run a marathon. Will cleared his throat. "Want to watch TV?" he asked. She shrugged. He switched it on to fill the silence, slinking to sit on the floor as an afternoon sitcom rerun played.

Suddenly the front door banged open. They both jumped; Eleven drew her knees up to her chest and stared at Will in horror. "Eleven!" Mike called as he ran into the living room. He skidded to a stop, beaming in pride. "See? See, I told you guys!"

Dustin and Lucas stopped dead in their tracks behind him. "Damn," Lucas said. "She is alive."

"You look like shit!" Dustin blurted out. Lucas elbowed him in the ribs. "Sorry, I mean...glad to have you back, Eleven."

Eleven smiled at them, but her eyes were on Mike. "Hi," she whispered, and Will hid a snicker behind his hand as Mike turned red all the way up to his ears. Dustin and Lucas were right, he did have a massive crush on her.

"How did you survive?" Lucas asked. "The last time we saw you you were dying. You were...like, all gray, and your ears were bleeding."

"And then you broke into a million pieces when you killed the demogorgon!" Dustin said.

"How'd you get back together?"

"Were you in the upside down?"

"How did you get out?"

Joyce stuck her head in the living room. "Why is there so much yelling?" she said. "I thought I told you boys you could come over as long as you didn't get Eleven worked up. She needs to rest."

"Sorry, Mrs. Byers," Lucas said politely, and Dustin and Mike echoed obediently.

Eleven looked around at them, bewildered. "The in-between," she said.

"Wait, what?" Mike said. "What's that?"

"Not just the upside down," she said. "The in-between too."

Dustin waved his hand impatiently. "Go on," he said.

Eleven opened her mouth, but only a faint squeak came out. She turned helplessly to Will, her brown eyes wide. He swallowed hard. "The in-between," he repeated, his mouth dry. "It's...it's not our world, but it's not the upside down." Eleven nodded, encouraging him to explain. Somehow he could feel her thoughts pressing into his, the words she wanted to say but she didn't have the vocabulary for. "It's

this...this dark, wet space. It's empty, but sometimes you find things there. So not exactly the upside down, but not exactly here either. It's where Eleven found me when I was lost. It's where I saw her every time I dreamed about her."

Eleven nodded emphatically, her relief palpable. Will could feel it seeping into his bones, easing some of his own tension from his shoulders. Impulsively he reached over, took her thin hand, and squeezed it, and it was like a puzzle piece clicked into place.

"But how does the in-between fit with the theory that Mr. Clarke gave us?"

"Well, maybe the in-between is the tightrope."

"How can a tightrope be big enough to contain a whole separate dimension?"

"Dude, a few months ago we didn't even know there was a separate dimension."

Will caught Eleven's eye as the boys argued. She was pale and her lips were colorless, but she was almost smiling as she looked at him.

Thank you, he heard in his own head, in her own voice, clear as day, and it was like an electric shock ran through him. He dropped her hand, but she didn't seem upset.

"Guys, guys, we'd better chill," Mike said, raising his voice over the bickering. "Will's mom is going to come back in and yell at us. And Elle needs to rest." He grabbed the TV remote. "Eleven, have you ever seen *The Price is Right*? It's like...a law that that's what you watch when you're home sick."

He switched the channel to the brightly colored game show and the other boys switched from arguing over metaphysics to how to properly play Plinko. Mike sidled closer to Eleven on the couch, until their hips were touching, and he quietly took her hand in his. Will sat on the floor, his knees folded to his chest, and tried to not think. Tried to be the Will Byers he used to be- quiet Will Byers, the kid who drew on the back of his math homework instead of listening to

the teacher and got picked on for daydreaming and always did the right thing.

He didn't know what the right thing was anymore. He didn't know who he was anymore.

The other boys stayed until nearly dinnertime, until the morning talk shows turned to afternoon cartoons and began to veer into primetime sitcoms. Eleven dozed on and off in fitful little spurts, her head falling against the pillow or Mike's shoulder only for her to jerk upright violently after a few minutes. Joyce eventually shooed them home, telling them they needed to get home before dark, and they left, albeit reluctantly, with plenty of promises to come back the next day.

Jonathan made dinner and they ate in the living room in front of the TV, all four of them, almost like normal except for the little girl huddled on the couch who didn't say a word and barely picked at her food.

It was just past eight when Hopper let himself in, hanging up his hat and his snow-dusted winter coat on his usual hook by the door. "Hey," he said. "How'd it go today?"

"Pretty well," Joyce said. "The boys came over. Eleven's been resting."

Hopper eyed her critically. She was asleep again; Jonathan had rescued her plate from her sleep-lax hands and set it on the end table and she was curled up tight against the arm of the couch. "Her face is flushed," he said. "Is she still running a fever?"

"I haven't checked in a while," Joyce said. "She hasn't complained about anything."

"I don't think she knows how," Hopper said. He crouched beside her and touched her forehead and then the side of her neck in a brusque, practiced gesture.

Eleven flinched violently and Hopper drew back. "Hey," he said, and Joyce half rose from her seat. "Hey, kid. It's all right. You're okay."

She threw herself back, nearly hitting Hopper in the chest with her

bent knee, and a half-strangled yelp broke from her throat. "Is she okay?" Jonathan asked.

"Fever dream," Hopper said. He sat down on the edge of the couch. "Come on, kid. Wake up. You're all right."

She screamed, a full-fledged scream, and flung herself away from him, shielding her face with her forearms. Joyce got up and knelt at the other side of the couch. "Sweetheart, wake up," she urged, but Eleven screamed again, and this time a picture frame hanging on the wall flew across the room and shattered.

Jonathan flinched. Will slunk down, making himself small. "Shit," Hopper said. Two glass ornaments popped on the Christmas tree, shedding red and green glass. "So that's what happens when psychic kids have nightmares."

Eleven howled, her arms and legs flailing, drowning in whatever dream was holding her captive, and Will blinked.

When he opened his eyes he was in the in-between, surrounded by thick glassy black nothingness, and warm water lapped and licked at his ankles. In front of him was a scene isolated like it was under a spotlight, lit in brilliant white, and he recoiled.

A man in a sharp black suit stood beside a hospital bed while two orderlies in blood-spattered white held down a writhing little figure. "Now, that's no way to behave," the man was saying, calm and collected. "You know better."

The girl on the bed screamed and Will realized she was screaming words. "Papa, no!" she shrieked. "Papa, no, please. Hurts. It hurts!"

He caught her gaze, her big brown eyes locking on his, and she stretched out a hand. "Help!" she pleaded. "Help me. Help me!"

Will couldn't move. His legs were locked in place. The man in the black suit nodded. "By force if you must," he said.

One of the orderlies flipped Eleven onto her stomach, pinning her down by her wrists with a hand pushing down on the small of her back, and the other orderly jabbed a thick gleaming needle into her

arm. Eleven sobbed, still struggling, and the orderly slowly pushed down on the syringe's plunger.

Gradually her thin body went still, her sobs falling into little chokes and gasps, and then she didn't move at all. The orderlies flipped her back over, her arms limp, and she lay there like a corpse, her eyes still struggling to stay open.

Will blinked, and he was back in his living room, his socks soaked from the warm wetness of the in-between, and Eleven was sobbing and fighting and begging.

He darted forward, ducking between Hopper and his mother, and grabbed Eleven's hand. Her fingers were thin and breakable and cold as ice. "It's okay," he told her. "You're not there. You're not there anymore. I saw it. But you're not there, Eleven. You're safe. We want to help you."

Her screams began to taper down to hitching sobs, and then thick unsteady coughs, her lashes flickering as she struggled to open her eyes. Hopper held out a cautious hand like he was trying to calm a spooked colt and she grabbed onto him like he was a lifeline.

Joyce crawled onto the couch beside Eleven and pulled her onto her lap. "You're safe, honey, you're safe," she crooned. "It was just a bad dream."

Eleven wrapped her arms around Joyce's forearm, blood dripping from her nose and flecking her pale lips. Her eyes were wide open and bloodshot.

You saw, Will heard her say in his head. You saw me?

He nodded helplessly.

Eleven's eyes rolled back in her head and she went limp in Joyce's arms. Will backed away, his wet socks sliding on the carpet, and when he was in the safety of the hall he ran, his breath catching in his throat.

He made it outside into the cold, sharply clear night seconds before the slug slid with a thick slimy pop from his throat; he dragged it out

of his mouth by the tail, gagging at the sour taste, and threw it onto the ground. "Fuck," he burst out, stomping helplessly at it until it was spread across the back porch like black jelly. He dragged his heels against the rough wood planks until his socks pulled away and he let them fall through the cracks into the dirt below, and then he sank down, his knees shaking, and dropped his head into his hands.

Karen held the steering wheel tightly, hands at ten and two, her back ramrod straight. Her daughter sat in the passenger seat beside her, her chin in her hand as she watched the snow-covered streets go by.

"Nancy?" she ventured. "What can you tell me about Eleven?"

Nancy raised her head. "Aren't you tired of hearing Mike talk about her?" she asked mildly.

"Yes, well..." Her voice trailed off. She wanted to lie, but if she wanted an honest relationship with her daughter she couldn't very well do that, could she? "To be quite honest, I...I didn't listen very carefully because I didn't think she'd come back from the dead."

Nancy smiled wryly. "I guess that's fair," she said. She turned away from the window and faced forward, adjusting her seatbelt. "Eleven was raised in a laboratory."

"Hawkins Power and Light?"

Nancy nodded. "The creepy government guy who talked to you and Dad, Dr. Brenner? He raised her," she said. "Well, kind of. He kept her locked up and ran experiments on her. But she called him Papa."

"Was he really her father?" Karen asked.

"Where are her birth parents?"

Nancy shrugged. "Nobody knows. And she's never talked about a mother. Mrs. Byers had to explain what a mother is to her."

Karen felt a sharp little pang of guilt. "So no one's looking for her?" she said. "There's no...concerned parents wondering what happened to her?"

"Only the Power and Light people know about her," Nancy said. She picked pensively at her thumbnail; Karen resisted the urge to chide her. "I think...I think the chief and Mrs. Byers know more. But they're not talking about it."

"Do you think they'll come back for her?" Karen asked.

"God, I hope not," Nancy said. "Whatever they did to her..." She bit her lip. "You'll see when you meet her."

Karen didn't see. She wasn't sure if she wanted to see.

Nancy hesitated. "I've been doing some research on my own," she confessed.

"Oh, is that why you've been spending so much time at the library?" Karen said. "I thought you were working on your research paper."

"Well, I mean, I have," Nancy said quickly, her ears reddening. "But I've been looking some stuff up." She tucked a loose strand of hair behind her ear. "There's a lot of stuff missing from the microfiche archives at the library, but I think Dr. Brenner had something to do with this group...MKUltra."

"That's a little far fetched, don't you think?" Karen said.

Nancy shot her a sharp look. "Only a little more far fetched than monsters coming out of walls and killing people," she said.

"Fair enough," Karen said.

Nancy crossed her arms. "It looks like Brenner recruited a bunch of people to undergo experiments, about mind control and LSD or something. I couldn't find a lot of details. I mean, they mentioned a...a Project Eloi, but-"

Karen's fingers locked on the steering wheel. She knew that. She knew that name. Where had she heard it before?

Nancy was still talking, but Karen couldn't hear anything but a roaring in her ears. Project Eloi...Project Eloi...

And then it clicked. Thirteen years ago. At work, back when she still worked, when Nancy was a toddler and Ted was hinting heavily that she'd be better off as a stay at home mother, and maybe they should even try for a second a baby. She was standing at the nurse's station on the pediatrics floor, scanning a patient's chart while a little candystriper chattered away at her.

"...the recruiter wants me to join the project, he says I'd be perfect!"

"Mm-hm."

"It's called Project Eloi. Isn't it fascinating? They've been working in Indianapolis but they're starting a new project here. And they said I'm just the right candidate! They'll pay my way through nursing school if I participate."

"That's wonderful."

"They're looking for nurses to staff the program too. You'd be terrific! D'you want me to tell them you're interested?"

"...Mom?"

"What?" Karen said, more sharply than she intended.

"You just blew through a stop sign," Nancy said.

Karen shook her head. "Oh," she said. "I..."

There was no excuse. She fell silent, and neither of them spoke for the rest of the drive.

She pulled into the half dirt, half gravel drive at the Byers' house. Nancy was out of the car in a second, smoothing her ponytail and tugging at her coat before bounding through the yard and up the weathered porch steps. Karen followed a little more slowly, picking her way around the piles of slushed snow in the yard. She still felt a little dazed, almost like she was underwater.

Jonathan answered Nancy's knock on the door. "Oh, hey," he said, startled. "I, uh...you're here to pick up Will?"

"And see Eleven," Nancy added. Jonathan held the door open a little wider to let them in. "How is she?"

Jonathan hesitated, looking from Nancy to Karen and back. "She's, uh..."

"She's what?" Nancy pressed.

"Eleven isn't getting better."

Karen frowned. "What do you mean?" she asked.

Jonathan shifted his weight uneasily. "She won't stop coughing," he said in a low voice. "She can't sleep, we can't even get her to eat or drink anything."

"Can't you take her to a hospital?" Nancy asked.

"Mom and Hopp keep arguing about it, they can't come up with a good enough cover story," Jonathan said. "We've been trying to take care of her and Mom's been freaking out."

"I can take a look at her," Karen volunteered before she could stop herself. "If you don't mind. I haven't worked in a few years, but maybe I can help your mother with a better care plan."

Jonathan looked confused. "Mom was a nurse before Mike was born," Nancy explained.

"Oh," he said. "Oh! Yeah, that would be great." He nodded down the hall. "She's in my room. Mike and Will are with her."

Karen followed Nancy, her shoes sinking into the carpet. The door was open but Nancy knocked anyway. "Hey, kids," she said. "Everybody behaving?"

"You're early," Mike complained. "Mom said I could stay till five."

"It is five," Karen said.

Mike scowled at her. The three kids were piled on Jonathan's narrow twin bed; a small rabbit-eared television had been set up on the

dresser but only Mike seemed to be watching. Eleven was barely visible between the boys, tucked up under blankets, and Will had a sketchbook balanced on his knees and he looked up with a slight smile. "Hi, Mrs. Wheeler," he said.

"Hi, sweetie," she said. "How are you doing?"

"Fine, thanks."

"Mom," Mike said, a little impatiently. "You can finally meet Eleven."

"Don't wake her up," Jonathan warned.

"She's not sleeping."

Karen approached them carefully, Nancy trailing behind her, and sat down on the edge of the bed. Mike scooted a little out of the way. "Eleven," he said, shaking her shoulder lightly. "This is my mom."

Eleven struggled to sit up, the blankets falling away, and Karen caught her breath. She hadn't known exactly what to expect, but

"Hi," Karen said, her voice hushed. "I'm Mike's mother." Eleven blinked, her large brown eyes dull. "It's nice to finally meet you."

Eleven looked at Mike, who nodded. "I told you my mom was nice," he whispered.

Joyce walked in, tugging her sweater around her shoulders. "Hey, Karen," she said. "Jonathan said you were here."

"Nancy and I came to pick up Mike, but Jonathan said Eleven isn't feeling well," she said. "I thought maybe I could take a look at her?"

"That would be great," Joyce said, relief evident in her voice. "Boys, how about you give us some space, okay?"

Will climbed off the bed obediently, sketchbooks in his arms, careful not to jostle Eleven, but Mike was reluctant. "We won't leave before you have the chance to say goodbye," Karen said, and finally Mike slid off the side of the bed with a last surreptitious squeeze of Eleven's elbow. "Close the door behind you, Michael."

Eleven flinched when the door clicked shut, but Joyce placed a gentle hand on her shoulder and she relaxed. "I used to be a nurse, when Nancy was a baby and Mike wasn't born yet," Karen said, trying to reassure her. "I just want to take a look and see if I can help you feel better. Can you tell me if anything hurts?"

Eleven bit her dry, cracked lips. "Can't breathe," she said.

"You can't breathe?" Karen repeated sympathetically. She brushed Eleven's short hair back from her forehead, flinching at the heat radiating from her skin. "She's too warm."

"We've been tracking her temperature," Joyce said. "She's, um, she's been between a hundred and a hundred and two for the most part. We haven't been able to get it down."

Karen probed her thumbs gently against the side of Eleven's neck. The girl stayed very still, staring blankly at the wall behind her head. "How much water has she been drinking?" she asked.

"We try to get her drink at least once an hour while she's awake, but she's been having a lot of trouble swallowing," Joyce said. She pushed her dark shaggy hair out of her eyes. "She can't eat much either. Mostly just soup and oatmeal and applesauce. And she was half starved already when we got her back."

"Where did you get her back from?" Karen asked.

"Mike found her in Will's little fort, out in the woods," Joyce said. "She'd been there for hours, all alone in the cold. And before that she'd been in the..."

Her voice trailed off. "The upside down," Nancy finished. Joyce nodded.

Karen took Eleven's hands in hers and caught her breath. Etched in the soft skin of the girl's arm were three numbers. The tattoo, just like Mike insisted. "What happened to your hands?" Karen asked, turning her palms up and looking at the neatly tied bandages.

"I fell," she said.

"She skinned her hands and her knees really badly, but they're starting to heal," Joyce explained.

Eleven coughed, her shoulders hunching forward. Joyce rubbed her back between her shoulderblades. Karen listened to the thick wet crackle of Eleven's lungs and winced. The girl shivered as the coughing fit subsided. "Joyce, can I talk to you?" Karen said. "Out in the hall?"

Joyce nodded, pausing long enough to pat Eleven's shoulder. Karen tugged her out of the room and caught sight of the boys idling by the door. "Go on and keep her company," she said.

"Can I stay longer?" Mike asked eagerly.

"Just go keep her company."

The boys darted back into the room and Karen pulled Joyce into the kitchen. "I think she has pneumonia," she said in a low voice, even though the boys were a good distance away. "You need to get her a hospital now."

Joyce sank down in the nearest chair, her head in her hands. "I know," she said. "And Jim knows. But we don't know how to get her there."

"What do you mean?"

"We can't just show up at the local hospital with a random child," Joyce said. "Especially not when the lab people might still show up. Jim doesn't think they're looking for her, but we can't risk it. They can't have her back."

Karen leaned back against the sink. "They abused her, didn't they?" she said flatly. Joyce dragged her hands over her mouth and nodded. "Nancy and Mike just say they experimented on her, which is bad enough, but the way she looks, the way she acts..."

"They treated her like an animal," Joyce whispered. "Every time I feed her she wolfs it down like she'll never see food again. She can't stand having the door closed or being in the dark. They used to...there was a closet, they'd lock her in it when she cried. They didn't teach her to

read, they didn't let her outside to play...they didn't even dress her properly. They kept her in hospital gowns and kept her head shaved."

"How-"

"There's tapes," Joyce confessed. "Videotapes going all the way back to when she was a toddler. Jim's seen them all. He didn't want me to see, but I've seen enough, and...and there's no way I'm letting her go now." Her dark eyes welled up. "I just don't want to have rescued her only to lose her now."

Karen sat down across from Joyce at the table and put her hands over hers. "There has to be a way," she said. "I still know some people at the hospital, maybe I can-"

A thick manila folder dropped on the table with a sharp thwack and a fluttering of pages. They both jumped. "What's this?" Joyce asked, bewildered.

Jim Hopper stood beside them, arms folded over his chest and his face as hard as stone. "That's how we're getting her into the hospital," he said.

Karen tentatively lifted the cover of the folder and squinted at the top page. "Whose medical records are these?" she asked.

"Sarah's."

Joyce sat up, startled. "Sarah's medical records?" she repeated.

"Who's Sarah?" Karen asked, but no one answered.

"Up until she was nine and got her diagnosis," Hopper said. He placed his hands on the table and leaned forward. "I'll take her to Woodward, it's two hours away and there's a good children's hospital there. I'll tell them she's Sarah. They don't know me there and they won't guess otherwise."

"What about the missing records?" Joyce asked. "Sarah would be...what, thirteen, fourteen now? That's five missing years."

"I'll tell 'em she went to live with her mother and her mom has the

rest of her records."

"How would you explain the signs of abuse?" Karen asked. "The bruises, the scrapes on her hands and knees. How skinny she is."

Hopper took a deep breath. "Tell 'em her stepfather abused her and that's why I took her back," he said quietly. "Eleven can follow that. If she says anything about 'papa,' I'll tell 'em it's what she called her stepfather."

Joyce rubbed her temples. "You think this'll work?" she asked.

"It has to."

"You've got to get her to a hospital soon," Karen said. "If she does has pneumonia, you have to get her treated right away."

Joyce got up from the table. "I'll go--"

"You're not going," Hopper said.

"But I--"

"You've got Jonathan and Will to take care of," Hopper said. "Besides, people will ask more questions if you show up with me."

"You can't take her alone," Joyce argued.

"I'll go."

All three of them turned around to see Jonathan and Nancy standing in the doorway. "I'll go," Nancy repeated.

"Nancy, it's not polite to eavesdrop," Karen said under her breath.

Nancy ignored her. "Eleven trusts me." Her gaze narrowed. "And they'll be more likely to believe Chief Hopper if he comes in with two daughters. Because you know they'll think you're the one hurting her if you come in alone. I'm perfectly fine, and I can tell whatever cover story you want."

"That's a good point," Hopper confessed. He turned to Karen. "You

okay with this?"

A few weeks earlier she would have had to stop and think it through. "Yes," she said. "Nancy can go."

"They might need to keep Eleven for a couple of days," Hopper warned.

"I can come pick up Nancy," Jonathan volunteered. He glanced at her out of the corner of his eye and quickly dropped his head. "Any time. Whenever."

Hopper looked around. "We got a plan then?" he asked.

"One thing left," Joyce said. "We have to see if Eleven can do it."

Hopper cursed under his breath. "I hope she can," he said. "Jonathan, can you get her? Keep the boys out. I don't want them going apeshit and trying to get involved."

Jonathan got up. Karen nudged the manila folder closer and flipped the cover over, scanning the typed information quickly. Sarah Grace Hopper, born April 7, 1970 to James and Diane Hopper...

She caught her breath. Of course. Sarah was the chief's little girl. The one who died. Five years ago it was all Hawkins could talk about--arrogant Jim Hopper slinking back into town with his tail between his legs, without his big city detective job or his blonde wife or his little daughter.

She skimmed further down the page, trying to see the records of what she died of, but the pages were missing and Hopper was glaring at her. Quickly she flipped the folder shut as Jonathan walked back into the kitchen with his arm around Eleven's shoulders. She shivered; the short puffed sleeves of her white nightgown left her arms bare and pinpricked with goosebumps.

"Come here, kid," Hopper said, his voice uncharacteristically gentle. She obeyed, wavering a little, and Joyce pulled her onto her lap. "So we've been trying to take care of you, but you need to see a doctor so you can get better. We're going to take you to the hospital."

"Hospital?" she echoed. "Like the lab?"

"No, no, sweetheart," Joyce reassured her. "The hospital is a good place. They're going to help you feel better and get well again."

"We've just...gotta be careful," Hopper said. "We can't call you Eleven while we're there. And you can't talk about the bad place, or the bad men."

She blinked at him slowly as Joyce smoothed her hair. "Who am I?" she asked.

Hopper tugged his chair a little closer and tilted his head so he could look her in the eyes. "I used to have a little girl," he said quietly. "She got sick, and she died. We're going to pretend that you're...that you're my daughter Sarah. So no one will try to take you away."

"Sarah?" Eleven repeated.

"Yeah," he whispered.

She blinked again, studying him through her lashes. "Do I have to call you Papa?" she asked in a low cracked voice.

"No," Hopper said firmly. He cupped his broad hand around the back of her slender neck. "Don't call me that. You can call me Dad, or Daddy, or..." His voice trailed off. "I'm not your papa. I'm not like him at all. Okay?"

Eleven nodded, her shoulders relaxing. Her pale arms rested on her lap, and Karen found herself staring at the thin black lines of her tattoo. And not only that, but in the bright light of the kitchen she could see barely-faded needle tracks running up and down her inner arms.

Hopper and Joyce were debating again, with Jonathan and Nancy both chiming in, and Karen looked up to see Eleven staring at her with those big brown eyes. She tried to smile, but Eleven didn't smile back. She looked exhausted, her short hair ruffled and her white nightgown- an old one of Nancy's, she remembered now- was spread around her like an angel's robes. Karen wanted to reassure her the way she would her own children- a kiss and a kind word, the way

only a mother could- but somehow she didn't think it would make a difference.

Author's Notes:

THIS. TOOK. SO. LONG.

Work has been crazy. Candlelight rehearsals have been crazy. And I was cast on a Saturday for a show that opened Friday and ran for two weeks, so basically I haven't been able to think straight. Plus it didn't help that this chapter was being a beast. I eliminated the entire Joyce portion that I originally wrote (it just wasn't working) and rewrote the Karen section at least three times before I landed on this.

Hopefully the next chapter will be up sooner! At the very least it's going to be interesting to write about Hopper pretending that Eleven and Nancy are his daughters, especially since Elle is so sick.

Please let me know what you think! And feel free to leave drabble prompts at my tumblr ([themetaphorgirl](#)).